A Discussion of Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum's *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*

A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy. By Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. 232p. $26.95 cloth, $14.95 paper.

Charge: More than a half-century ago, Richard Hofstadter identified the "paranoid style" as an important feature of American politics. However, in *A Lot of People are Saying*, Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum argue that a "new" form of conspiracism has begun to infect contemporary American political life. Whereas "old" conspiracy theorists sought hidden evidence to describe why things are not as they seem, Muirhead and Rosenblum argue that purveyors of the new conspiracism make no attempt to substantiate their theories. In light of this fact-free approach, the authors thus warn that contemporary conspiracy theorists pose an unprecedented danger to foundational elements of American democracy, including political parties and knowledge-producing institutions. Moreover, Muirhead and Rosenblum assert, "The new conspiracism moved into the White House with the inauguration of Donald Trump" (p. 1), "the conspiracist in chief" (p. ix). If there is merit to this argument, then the fate of Trump's reelection bid carries monumental consequences for the future of American democracy, as well as the way in which the United States responds to the unprecedented coronavirus pandemic. We therefore asked a range of scholars to comment on Muirhead's and Rosenblum's bold set of claims.

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After the Civil War, Southern white men plunged into a campaign of terror and ethnic cleansing against the former slaves. The Democrats—then the party of white supremacy—blinked away the violence, which one Illinois newspaper described as "bogus outrages" manufactured by Republicans. Still, for all its tribal horrors, the politics of that era remained tethered to a rough if contested reality—a sharp contrast to our own tribal days (Morone 2020).

Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum have never been alarmists. Muirhead's last book was a brief for partisanship, and Rosenblum famously saw the spirit of Tocqueville stirring even in dubious groups like armed militias (Muirhead 2014; Rosenblum 2008). But now they have written a fretful warning about democracy in peril. An unprecedented form of conspiracy mongering has exploded onto the political scene, they write, with new conspiracists flinging around charges without evidence, without proof, without theory. President Barack Obama is a Muslim from Kenya! Millions of illegal voters cast ballots! Hilary Clinton (and Bill Gates and Oprah) run a child sex ring out of the Comet Ping-Pong pizzeria! The bogus claims are validated by nothing more than repetition—by retweets, Facebook likes, and roars at rallies.

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A Lot of People Are Saying offers us a *tour* (*de force*) through the dark side of political speech, carefully demarcating the boundaries between the new conspiracism and the more familiar shadowlands of lies, demagoguery, bullshit, and old-fashioned conspiracies. Muirhead and Rosenblum offer a fascinating relative defense of traditional conspiracies (they slip into a couple themselves, for example, blaming dark money for Republican environmental attitudes). And they adroitly spin out the perilous consequences of the new conspiracism: disorientation, an assault on expertise, the sneering rejection of compromise, and an erosion of democracy itself.

Muirhead and Rosenblum have identified a new kind of speech, found it rooted in social media, and warn that it corrodes our very community. Their book is a bracing read that illuminates our politics and our times. But I want to step back and ask four questions about the roots of the new conspiracism and the role it actually plays in American politics.

Does the new conspiracism really matter? Try a thought experiment. Imagine that the new conspiracism did not exist at all: there were no birthers, no Pizzagate, and no looming invasion of Texas. President Trump and his ilk would be reduced to more traditional bloviation—lies, bigotry, spin, innuendo, and exaggeration. Would anything be different? As Muirhead and Rosenblum note, citizens respond to the new conspiracism as a signal of tribal identity. And for that, it seems to me, old-fashioned

lies and demagoguery would serve just as well. Perhaps the crazy conspiracies are simply one manifestation of the deeper problem, a tribal clash convulsing the nation.

Where does the new conspiracism come from? Muirhead and Rosenblum do not dwell on the Republican Party's long journey into this miasma. Back in 2004, journalist Ron Suskind was startled when an aide to President George W. Bush (probably Karl Rove, although he denies it) scoffed that reporters were trapped in the "reality-based community" where "solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." You can toss your "empiricism" and "enlightenment," chuckled Rove. "We create our own reality." Much of what Muirhead and Rosenblum describe was disorienting us two decades ago (Suskind 2005).

Where does the new tribalism come from? Our dilemma lies, ultimately, in an unprecedented twist in America's ferocious culture wars. Traditionally, each party embraced (and, alternately, spurned) a different liminal group. The Democrats welcomed immigrants and stuck ballots in their hands almost before they had recovered from their ocean crossing; the Republicans (and, before them, the Whigs) once upon a time housed abolitionists and gender rights activists. No party ever gathered all of these so-called minorities into one political coalition—until the Democrats slowly did so between 1936 (when African Americans began to switch parties) and 2000 (when Asian Americans did). Republicans gleefully responded by gathering whites, nativists, and social conservatives all fearful of declining status. For the first time, the parties now mainline the deepest cultural conflicts in American history right into politics (Morone 2020).

The Census Bureau tossed a statistical stick of dynamite into the mix after the 2000 census: the United States would likely become majority minority in a generation. As Mickey, Levitsky, and Way (2017) argue, no democracy has ever had to negotiate a change in its racial or ethnic majority. Ultimately, *A Lot of People Are Saying* documents one consequence of the tribal war that accompanies the transition to what may be a new American majority.

What about the Democrats? There is another division running through American society that reinforces the tribal conflict and exacerbates the new conspiracism. A global economy powerfully rewards college graduates trained to think abstractly—and leaves everyone else behind. Today, political speech reflects the same stark divide between the haves and have-nots.

Democrats design and defend their policies in wonky, economistic language—good luck parsing Clinton Care or Obamacare or cap and trade or the Transpacific Partnership without a lot of education. The technocratic turn in policy excludes broad publics from the democratic conversation and stimulates this latest recrudescence of the long populist, anti-intellectual tradition. Of course, governance requires expertise. But enacting democracy, as Muirhead and Rosenblum urge us to do, requires clear talk about programs and values.

Muirhead and Rosenblum brilliantly excavate a new kind of speech, driven by tribalism, with a long history among Republicans, and unwittingly exacerbated by wonky Democrats. The authors offer a fair start at resistance by urging us to "enact democracy." Doing so will require the party of government, its many advisers, and the kinds of people who read journals like this to talk about policy in the straight language of values, choices, and obligations. Technical details are indispensable, but we let them eclipse straightforward discourse at our own peril—as *A Lot of People Are Saying* so clearly shows.

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We are in one of the few times in modern history where conspiracy thinking has entered mainstream American politics in a serious way. Although conspiracy thinking as we know it has been around at least since the French Revolution, we have seen a surge in its importance globally, especially in the United States where this mode of discourse is being driven by Donald Trump and his supporters. Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum provide important insights into this phenomenon in their recent book, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*.

Whereas traditional conspiracy thinking has rested on the idea that there are powerful hidden forces intentionally controlling events for some larger purpose, the authors argue that Trump-style conspiracy relies on no such claim. In "presidential conspiracy" (pp. 1–2), the president actively works to turn one sector of the people against another with accusations that he pulls out of thin air. Unlike traditional conspiracy thinking, there is no attempt to build a theory with evidence, but merely an exhortation to affirm repeated assertions (p. 52). This "social validation" (p. 3) is demonstrated by things such as retweets and "likes" on Facebook, and ultimately amounts to an "assault on reality" (p. 8). The authors are correct to point to the extraordinarily dangerous and highly unusual phenomenon of a president who uses the authoritative weight of his office in an attempt to call truth itself into question purely for the aggrandizement of his own ego. Although many public intellectuals and political scientists have pointed to the Trump moment as a kind of populism that is transforming the Republican party, Muirhead and Rosenblum contend correctly, in my view, that he is in fact anti-political party. As the authors show, Mr. Trump belonged to neither political party for most of his life and has actively worked to exploit divisions in the Republican Party itself (pp. 75–76). One of the most alarming features of this approach is Trump's presentation of himself as the arbiter of facts as contrasted with elitist experts. The authors cite the hurricane in Puerto Rico where the President tweeted the lie that, "3000 people did not die.... This was done by the Democrats in order to make me look as bad as possible, the correct number is in the range of 6 to 18" (p. 102). Certainly, we have seen this demonstrated repeatedly during the COVID-19 pandemic and by explicit prohibitions from Trump to his own executive agencies about speaking of climate change (p. 110–11).

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Although I applaud the authors for this important and timely book, I challenge two principal arguments that they make. First, I am not persuaded that this style of conspiracy thinking is fundamentally new, and second, I very much disagree with the claim that it has no overarching goal or theory. The title of the book refers to the allegedly new way in which Trump spreads conspiracy via rumors, saying and tweeting things such as "even if it isn't totally true, there's something out there" (p. 28). This is a point that has also been made by journalist Jenna Johnson who cites numerous examples in her 2016 article in the *Washington Post.* While true that this is the Trump style, it is not new. For example, Greenhill and Oppenheim (2017) have analyzed conspiratorial rumors as a factor in spreading violence in areas of global instability and conflict. And Stephen Bronner (2003) has pointed to the role of rumor as far back as the spread of anti-Semitism in nineteenth-century Russia and Europe via the faked *Protocols of The Elders of Zion.* We can look to the witch trials for a final example, where the accusations of witchcraft made against women were almost always stoked and preceded by rumors of their connections to magic and Satan.

I also take issue with the idea that Trumpian conspiracism has no overarching goal or theory. The cause may be invisible to the authors because they make a crucial omission in not including a discussion of the importance of ultra-right beliefs, white supremacism, nationalism and misogyny for this brand of conspiracy theory—all of which have been very clearly articulated in *Breitbart* and by many Trump supporters and advisers. Conspiracies give explanatory power to the ultra-right point of view. How else could one explain a Black man becoming president and a woman under consideration as his successor absent a conspiracy? How could one contend with religious pluralism when one feels they are being replaced by Muslims and Jews? In fact, this is the theory linked to French writer Renaud Camus's "replacement theory," a theory explicitly used by the nationalist marchers in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 who chanted "Jews will not replace us." Camus wrote, "The great replacement is very simple, you have one people and in the space of a generation you have a different people" (Charlton 2019). Thus, the authors' claim that there is "no call for collective action to free the nation" (p. 31) ignores these underlying ideologies, which are in fact, precisely representative of just such calls.

"Birtherism" and "pizzagate," both of which the authors cite as random assertions with no theoretical link, are in fact clearly linked to this larger conspiratorial worldview and are completely consistent with the broader complex of international conspiracies reflected in far-right fictional favorites such as *The Turner Diaries* and *Camp of the Saints.* The latter work, depicting a fictional Muslim takeover, was explicitly promoted both by Steve Bannon and White House adviser Stephen Miller (Garcia-Navaro

2019). Indeed, we have seen actual calls to violence consistent with these conspiracies from the president on more than one occasion, including in his Mount Rushmore speech and in his references to how to stop Hillary Clinton in 2016. As he mused at a rally, "although the Second Amendment people—maybe there is, I don't know" (p. 66). His recent deployment of federal troops to US cities to put down #BLM antiracism uprisings is also consistent with this belief system. Finally, these are all very clearly linked to the view of him perpetrated by the increasingly mainstream "QAnon" movement which sees him as a warrior against a "deep state" that will rig the November 2020 election against him.

Though flawed, *A Lot of People Are Saying* should certainly be read as one of the very important recent works warning us of the perils of failing to take Trumpian conspiracy theorists seriously as threats to democracy.

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That democratic regimes are in trouble worldwide is common wisdom today. Not by chance, academics and pundits alike are advancing novel theories to explain why we seem to be witnessing dark times for democracy. Russell Muirhead's and Nancy Rosenblum's book can be seen as one of these intellectual efforts. The specificity of their approach lies in the proposition that a new form of conspiratorial thinking is one of the major threats to democracy today.

Before raising some critiques of the book, I would like to describe its central argument, which is quite novel and interesting indeed. According to Muirhead and Rosenblum, the new conspiracism is different and much more dangerous than classic conspiracism. The latter is characterized by the elaboration of theoretical arguments and empirical inquiries that permit one to make sense of the political world. Put briefly, classic conspiracism hinges on the development of theories that present a comprehensive narrative of events, whereby allegedly secret machinations are identified and explanations for political phenomena are offered. By contrast, the new conspiracism advances no theory because it "dispenses with the burden of explanation. Instead, we have innuendo and verbal gesture: 'A lot of people are saying…' … What validates the new conspiracism is not evidence but repetition" (p. 3). This new type of conspiracism— which the authors label "conspiracism without theory"—comes not out of the blue but is rather the byproduct of structural transformations of contemporary societies, in particular the revolution in broadcast technology. The latter "has displaced the gatekeepers, the producers, editors, and scholars who decided what was worthy of dissemination. The way is opened for conspiracy entrepreneurs who initiate and disseminate a seemingly infinite array of wild accusations" (p. 40).

There is no doubt that the distinction between classic conspiracism and the new conspiracism is not only quite interesting, but also helpful when trying to understand Donald Trump and his continuous efforts to create his own reality. The book analyzes many fascinating episodes that vividly exemplify the ways in which Trump's presidency adopts the new conspiracism to attack its opponents and mobilize its supporters. However, Muirhead's and Rosenblum's approach is centered on the case of the United States and at times has parochial tendencies. Of course, undertaking a detailed analysis of one case study is no misstep per se. As John Gerring (2004) has persuasively argued, case studies can be very powerful for the development of new theories that can be used to analyze other realities. Unfortunately, such is not the case with Muirhead's and Rosenblum's book, because the authors provide an analysis of the current situation in the United States that in my opinion fails to grasp the distinctiveness of the current US political system from a comparative perspective. Given that the authors put little effort into situating Donald Trump's coming to power and his administration in a broader comparative fashion, they are unable to shed enough light on issues that are crucial to better understanding the critical situation in which US democracy finds itself today.

The main area in which the absence of a comparative approach to analyzing the US political system becomes evident is in the understanding of the Republican Party presented in the book. Although most of the examples of new conspiracism are centered on Trump and his presidency, the authors do point out instances orchestrated by key figures in the GOP, such as Ted Cruz (pp. 104–6), James Inhofe (p. 107), Rand Paul (pp. 102–3), and Marco Rubio (p. 91). Muirhead and Rosenblum argue in passing—rather than in a systematic way—that in the United States the new conspiracism "has a partisan penumbra that aligns with the extreme right" (p. 148). Seen in this light, the new conspiracism that US democracy is experiencing today did not start with Trump, but rather with the transformation of the Republican Party into a far-right political entity. Because US observers are not accustomed to studying their own reality in comparative perspective, they often pay little attention—or sometimes completely ignore—the fact that the GOP today is anything but a mainstream right party (Roberts 2019). This means that the new conspiracism that the authors identify is probably something inherent to the populist radical right but is not as compatible with the mainstream right. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that in Europe key figures of Christian Democratic parties, such as Angela Merkel in Germany, or of Liberal parties—Emmanuel Macron in France—would be willing to adopt the new conspiracism. On the contrary, the connection between the new conspiracism and populist radical-right leaders such as Bolsonaro in Brazil, Erdoğan in Turkey, or Orbán in Hungary is quite evident. Nevertheless, Muirhead and Rosenblum pay insufficient attention to the singularity of the Republican Party in comparative perspective. For instance, the authors are right in claiming that John McCain was one of the few figures within the GOP establishment to openly criticize the new conspiracism (p. 150), but they forget to mention that none other than John McCain nominated Sarah Palin as his vice presidential running mate for the 2008 election. This is not a minor point. By giving visibility to one of the main voices of the Tea Party movement, McCain ended up stimulating the transformation of the Republican Party into the party it is today (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

Last, but not least, another problem of the book is that it provides little clarity about the sources of the new conspiracism in the United States. At moments one has the

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impression that this is a top-down phenomenon, because the authors maintain that GOP leaders invest time and energy in employing the "a lot of people are saying" mantra. However, the authors also argue from time to time that the new conspiracism is a bottom-up phenomenon, when they show that voters and entrepreneurs believe in, create, and disseminate "fake news." This ambivalence is probably related to the fact that the authors hold that the new conspiracism follows both a bottom-up and a top-down dynamic. If this argument is true, then, dealing with the new conspiracism is a mammoth task, and the solutions offered by the authors in the concluding chapter (pp. 166–76) have little chance of success. After all, is it hard to believe that enacting democracy and speaking truth to conspiracy— the two responses proposed by the authors— are the ways to confront the far-right character of the Republican Party.

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Two phenomena marked 2020 as a summer unlike any other: the global surge of COVID-19 and widespread demonstrations against police killings of unarmed African Americans. In the United States, the federal government's responses to the pandemic and protest have been intimately related. The White House manufactures and amplifies groundless accusations against scientists, activists, medical professionals, teachers, ordinary citizens, and anyone who contests the official version of the truth. Few Republican Party leaders are willing to challenge even the most outlandish suggestions or to accept responsibility for the spread of preventable death and suffering. *A Lot of People Are Saying*, Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum's critical assessment of the "new conspiracism," makes an invaluable intervention by clearly identifying the roots and likely consequences of this assault on democratic practices and norms. Written with remarkable economy, *A Lot of People Are Saying* traces the ascendance of the new conspiracism, identifies its distinctive threat to political parties and knowledge-producing institutions, and calls for the vigorous defense of truth and shared decision-making.

Conspiracist thinking is a long-standing feature of US political life, but Muirhead and Rosenblum demonstrate the particular dangers of today's "conspiracy without the theory." Offering neither a positive political vision nor an explanation for claims ranging from attacks on climate science to the idea that Barack Obama is not a US citizen, it "not only is averse to the mundane workings of democratic politics but assaults its institutions and practices wholesale" (p. 45). With the election of Donald Trump, furthermore, conspiracists have been empowered to stifle opposition and delegitimize core elements of democratic discourse, including a free press, expert knowledge, and skepticism.

Reading *A Lot of People Are Saying* in the midst of a global health crisis is illuminating. Although the book was published before the emergence of COVID-19, Muirhead and Rosenblum anticipate the astonishing degree to which medical authority has been sidelined or co-opted during the pandemic. That the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recently revised its caution about reopening schools in the face of political pressure is disorienting in precisely the ways that Muirhead and Rosenblum describe. Their argument is also (modestly) heartening insofar as it insists that the defense of the truth and of practices of shared decision-making does not require heroism, only a willingness to "speak truth to conspiracism and pay attention to the pedagogical moments built into the everyday political life" (p. 165).

For all of its insight, however, *A Lot of People Are Saying* largely sidesteps a key dimension of the Trumpian worldview and the conspiracism it both feeds and feeds on. So many of the book's examples—Trump's claims about the immigration of "rapists" from Mexico or his Islamophobic travel policies or his response to the bloodshed in Charlottesville—depend, explicitly or tacitly, on asserting the prerogatives of whiteness. Not every new conspiracist claim reveals racial animus. Still, there is a striking through line from the "classic conspiracism" of the Declaration of Independence to contemporary assertions that supporters of Black Lives Matter are linked to ISIS. Where Muirhead and Rosenblum offer a compelling account of the differences between today's conspiracist attacks and the colonists' grievances against the crown, the Declaration's complaint about "domestic insurrections" and the threat of "merciless Indian Savages" reflects a political culture that defines itself, and regularly defines truth, in opposition to the racialized others it both oppresses and fears. As thinkers as varied as Alexis de Tocqueville, Michael Rogin, and Toni Morrison have discerned, white Americans' democratic commitments have long been predicated on differentiation from or the demonization of nonwhite life. From this angle, there is no "normal" operation of democratic political institutions or practices to which we might return, and the "common sense" that Muirhead and Rosenblum invoke invites further scrutiny.

Indeed, one of the striking features of the new conspiracism is its kinship with discursive practices that have legitimized and sustained anti-Black violence across US history. Ida B. Wells's campaign against lynching at the turn of the twentieth century contended with many of the forces that Muirhead and Rosenblum's book identifies. The idea of Black male criminality that served as pretense for the murder of African American men (and women and girls) constituted an "assault on reality" that sought "to replace evidence, argument, and a shared ground of understanding with convoluted conjurings and bare assertions" (p. 9). Indeed, Wells's *Southern Horrors* (1892) and *Red Record* (1895) catalog the shifting, often trivial, justifications for individual acts of murder and note that white southerners only settled on the charge of interracial rape—"the old threadbare lie"—after floating claims about Black insurrection and voting power. If the specific aim was to delegitimize Black citizenship and disorient critics of white supremacy, the effect was to undermine the very possibility of constitutional democracy for all. Wells's critique thus poses a question, echoed in today's insistence that *Black Lives Matter*, about whether our current predicament is really so different from earlier attacks on the truth of human equality or the value of shared governance and the rule of law.

A Lot of People Are Saying makes a bracing and important contribution to our understanding of the peril of this

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political moment. Muirhead's and Rosenblum's diagnosis of the new conspiracism is most trenchant when it cuts through outrageous statements and baffling attacks on democratic norms to offer a sober account of their origins and effects. At the same time, Wells's example indicates the urgency of studying and opposing the new-*old* conspiracism. It is this hybrid form, in which recently empowered nihilism is grafted onto long-standing white supremacist accusations and fantasies, that is poised to destroy democratic values and institutions in the United States. Insofar as the newly awful is not entirely unprecedented, finally, we ought to look to the work of Wells and other critics of the conspiracist thinking that fueled settler colonialism, slavery, Jim Crow, and nativist repression of many kinds as models of what it means to bear witness when truth is on the run.

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Trying to understand the particular "age of conspiracy" that Americans find themselves in today is a quite puzzling problem. On the one hand, conspiracy thinking, broadly understood, is largely a benign political influence. Yet, on the other hand, we are undoubtedly living through a politically charged and conspiratorial world. One need only Google the following phrases to enter the active world of conspiracy theories today: "Pizzagate," "QAnon," and "Flat Earth." How can we square this circle? For Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, the authors of *A Lot of People Are Saying*, one way to make sense of this "disorienting" world is by understanding that there's an "old conspiracism" and a "new conspiracism." Put succinctly, whereas old conspiracism uses "theories" in an attempt to explain the world around us—by providing explanations for errant data, closure for unsolved cases, and the like—"new conspiracism" replaces evidence and theories of explanation with assertions and innuendos (p. 27). Where old conspiracists would try to reconstruct Lee Harvey Oswald's time in Dallas, new conspiracists would simply allude to a political opponent being involved in JFK's assassination. There is no evidentiary "there there" for the new conspiracist, only an assertion that "seems true enough" (pp. 55–56).

Where scholars looking into old conspiracism found a largely benign political influence, Muirhead and Rosenblum see significant political consequences with the rise of new conspiracism. It is their clarity on this point that really pushes the entire literature forward: conspiracy thinking *by itself* does not an authoritarian, populist, or neo-fascist make. Instead of a programmatic critique, new conspiracism erodes the political-epistemological foundations of liberal democratic constitutionalism. As Muirhead and Rosenblum put it, new conspiracists seize on the fact that "knowledge is not a set of static facts, but a negotiation." Although old conspiracism certainly pushes the boundaries of what many would consider credible science— think of the "Scholars for 9/11 Truth" or "Flat Earth" conventions with panels and demonstrations—new conspiracism attempts to destroy the entire enterprise of Enlightenment science and "common sense" (pp. 122–23, 126, 127). For Muirhead and Rosenblum, new conspiracism is not dangerous because it is necessarily populist or nationalistic or authoritarian, but because it lays the groundwork for these "extremist" regimes by delegitimating the epistemological and ontological foundations of political liberalism and constitutionalism.

For most political scientists interested in parties, partisanship, and conspiracy thinking, the chapters and sections of the book where Muirhead and Rosenblum discuss the role that parties play in a healthy democracy and how they are under assault by "new conspiracism" are particularly important. Drawing on previous works on party and partisanship, Muirhead and Rosenblum make the compelling point that, even though there is a strong correlation today between new conspiracism and the Republican Party, new conspiracism is largely "antiparty" (pp. 76, 86). It is political insofar as it is a major vehicle for antiparty sentiment today, which undermines political parties—one of the major institutions for an effective democratic politics (p. 63). This is one of the major contributions to the literature: showing how conspiracy thinking relates to a certain kind of political identity that may itself be covered over in our normal measures (i.e., new conspiracists may be Republicans not because they are truly Republican but because the Republican elite have adopted the antiparty sentiment; pp. 95–98).

I take the crux of the book to be the following conclusion: "new conspiracism," with its antiparty logic, wants to "end politics" by delegitimating pluralism as a necessary element of political life (p. 132). What Muirhead and Rosenblum describe as the political dangers of the "new conspiracism" mirrors the consequences of "political extremism," as described in Rosenblum's *On the Side of the Angels* (2008). In that book, Rosenblum paints the following picture of "extremism" and "extremist" politicians: "they pledge themselves to ignore the facts" (p. 406); "extremists tend to be indignant and inquisitorial and to brand opponents as abject, stupid, or traitors to ideals" (p. 409); and, finally, "with its single-mindedness, its violation of inclusiveness, comprehensiveness, and disposition to compromise, extremism is tyrannical and despotic" (p. 409). Likewise, in *A Lot of People Are Saying*, Muirhead and Rosenblum characterize "new conspiracism"—although not itself despotic—as paving the way for despotism and extremism by precisely ignoring facts, science, and experts and asserting a new reality (p. 170), branding political opposition as existential enemies (pp. 90–92), and undermining the institutions of parties themselves as anything other than the vehicle of the "true" (as opposed to "fake") voice of the people (p. 86). What the extremist wants, "new conspiracism" delivers: it clears the ground for a new reality to be constructed on the ruins of the old pluralist regime—in short, the end of politics (pp. 122–23).

Of course, Muirhead and Rosenblum are no doubt well aware of the connections between their concept of new conspiracism and partisan extremism, but in the book it is not clear how these are truly separate concepts: in light of this account of extremism, "new conspiracism" is not so much a natural extension of "old conspiracism," but instead is a powerful rhetorical tool in the extremist's arsenal. Indeed, when Lincoln famously asserted in his first debate with Douglas that the South was conspiring to spread slavery all over the country and reassert it in the North,

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was Lincoln acting like a "new conspiracist"? Or was he an "old" conspiracy theorist giving voice to antiparty sentiment (see Rosenblum's *On the Side of the Angels*, p. 105)?

This is not to say that what Muirhead and Rosenblum call "new conspiracism" is not an accurate description of contemporary America, or that their unique account of the assault that conspiracy thinking can have on democratic foundations is wrong. Rather, my point is that "new conspiracism" is not a warning of the future collapse of the democratic regime under extremist assault, but a confirmation that we are in the middle of that collapse. Regardless of the precise relationship between party extremism and new conspiracism, Muirhead and Rosenblum are right that liberal democracy needs to be defended—we perhaps only disagree about how much time we have left to prepare. They are also right that perhaps the most shocking failure of the liberal democratic system was that it produced a sense of complacency and relied perhaps too much on its post–World War II laurels (p. 166). They are also right—and this should be convincing to future researchers—to focus on the political-epistemological foundations of democracy as the weakest parts of the American regime. Whether it is the rise of a "new conspiracism" or the resurgence of party extremism, today's American politics is indeed "disorienting."

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In his classic liberal text, *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill argues that expansive individual freedom is valuable to society—and not just to individuals—because its exercise leads society closer to truth. Even if individuals loudly, offensively, and annoyingly proclaim falsehoods, their speech remains valuable because, on Mill's account, it prompts the rest of us to understand more clearly why and how our principles, values, or scientific explanations are correct. Conversely, the ultimate indeterminacy of truth—the fact that we will never settle on what the absolute truth is— is part of Mill's justification for his robust defense of individual freedom. If we cannot say for sure what the absolute best life is, or what the absolute best explanation of the cosmos is, then we must defend a broad scope of individual freedom so that possibly true, yet unpopular, ways of thinking and living—which may be despised or decried by an individual's society—have a fecund ground in which to grow. A defense of liberal freedom, in other words, depends on defending truth as a crucial social value while also insisting on the importance of all kinds of skepticism about, and even rejections of the importance of, truth.

If a defense of truth *and* skepticism about truth have long characterized the liberal tradition, so too has an attempt to differentiate legitimate from illegitimate forms of skepticism about truth. Mill says we may shame or ostracize individuals who are mean or egotistical in their speech. And although he defends a broad scope of western forms of life and speech, he claims that "barbarian" nations are too immature to practice free, skeptical speech, and that other nations (especially China) are too bogged down by tradition to be capable of free thinking.

In *A Lot of People Are Saying*, Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum negotiate a similar problem in their indictment of what they call the "new conspiracism." They argue that the "new conspiracism" is dangerous to democracy because it's the *wrong kind* of skepticism about truth: "Its fabulations sever the connection between assertions and beliefs on the one hand and anything verifiable in the world on the other. This immunizes conspiracist claims from scrutiny and doubt. What follows is that the new conspiracists undercut not only knowledge but also skepticism" (p. 116). The new conspiracism pretends to be a form of democratic skepticism, but it is actually, on their account, a kind of tribalism, in which people affirm their identity through affirming conspiracist claims. Individuals come to desire tribalism rather than democracy, out of a disgust with two foundations of democratic legitimacy: political parties and knowledge-producing institutions. For Muirhead and Rosenblum, the consequences of the new conspiracism are dire: its irrational character—its disconnection from reality—disorients the public and delegitimates the partisan politics and knowledge-producing institutions on which democracy depends. The best response to this, on the authors' account, is to speak truth to conspiracy and to "enact democracy," by which they mean elected officials pedagogically performing adherence to existing institutional procedures and democratic norms (pp. 158–59). Here, the role of citizens in relegitimating democracy is more limited: watching and absorbing the behavior of those truly on the political stage—elected officials. For relegitimation to "take hold, citizens *need to witness* exhibitions of institutional integrity" (my emphasis; p. 159).

Muirhead and Rosenblum are correct that the new conspiracists are not practicing a form of skepticism that relies on reasons or proceeds via justification. Yet, should we be so quick to dismiss all claims to truth-telling in which there is no connection between the assertion and "anything verifiable in the world"? Other forms of democratic contestation that we might be quicker to avow and affirm also lack this connection. For example, when protestors proclaim that "Black Lives Matter" in response to police violence, are they pointing to something "verifiable" in the world? After all, their proclamation responds to the fact that Black lives are *not* mattering. This is why, as Hannah Arendt argues, the liar and the political actor have something important in common: they both imagine the world otherwise. Indeed, BLM protesters are making a different kind of political claim, a claim of how the world *should* be or how they claim it *must* be, and their claim (in Bonnie Honig's terms) demands *vindication* through political action and transformation, not verification through reason-giving or justificatory arguments.

Of course, part of the reason why BLM protesters speak in this register of democratic claims-making—putting their bodies on the line on behalf of a world that does not yet exist—is because the "normal" society in which they live, which Muirhead and Rosenblum appear to want us to return to, is racist, unequal, and unjust. In the terms of "normal" American society, their claim that Black Lives Matter is provocative, jarring, and out of tune with the color-blind ethos that structures how many US citizens view reality. Indeed, to some part of American society, the speech of BLM protesters surely looks like the wrong, irrational form of truth-telling that Muirhead and Rosenblum frame as new conspiracist—with no verifiable connection to anything in the world.

My point is not to challenge Muirhead and Rosenblum's account on behalf of a more precise account of what kind of skepticism is democratically valuable, but instead to point to the problems with the attempt to adjudicate the problem of truth and politics abstractly and procedurally—through defining criteria by which we can adjudicate in advance

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(im)proper democratic truth-telling. Even though Muirhead and Rosenblum would surely distance themselves from Mill's imperial hierarchies of thought and speech, their account of truth-telling as a practice of elected officials adhering to existing norms is inhabited by a Millian problem: attempts to justify supposedly neutral attributes of truth/truth-telling in a racist society inevitably obscure racial, gender, and class hierarchies that code who counts as a truth-teller and what counts as truth.

Muirhead and Rosenblum's account thus unfortunately narrows our understanding of democratic truth-telling in a time that calls us to a more expansive imaginary of truth-telling as a practice of marginalized people telling the truth of their experience and changing the world so they and their truths can count as real and meaningful.

This narrowed conception of truth-telling does not simply affect how we see truth-tellers; it also shapes how we see the role of truth-telling in politics. For Muirhead and Rosenblum, truth-telling by elected officials via "enacting" democracy is important because it returns us to existing institutional norms. This view fails to capture the stakes and demands of our current political moment, in which truth-telling about police violence, for example, is aimed precisely at unsettling and transforming norms of racist institutions, and where truth-telling about climate change is not primarily about defending the authority of existing "knowledge-producing institutions," but about demanding *new* institutions that would enact a Green New Deal. When we narrow our concept of truth-telling to elected officials adhering to existing norms, we miss the kinds of democratic truth-telling that are most crucial right now: those that aim not at shoring up the old norms of a racist, unjust society, but rather at changing the world.

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