Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, in discussions of Italy, Portugal and Spain, but it has been a much more widespread (and for some scholars more pernicious) phenomenon, going back in some cases to the last century's conditionalities attached to loans from the Bretton Woods institutions. In their conclusion, Greer and colleagues indicate the need for more attention to political economy, but their focus is on vaccine availability rather than on larger contextual patterns. Future work could build on the characterization of COVID-19 as "neoliberal disease" (Matthew Sparke and Owain David Williams, "Neoliberal Disease: COVID-19, Co-Pathogenesis and Global Health Insecurities," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 2021). It should also foreground the political economy of a catastrophic underprovision of global public goods: neglecting "possibly the highest-return public investment ever" in vaccines and other preventive measures (Ruchir Agarwal and Gita Gopinath, *A Proposal to End the COVID-19 Pandemic*, International Monetary Fund Staff Discussion Note, 2021).

None of these observations should distract from the tremendous value that both books add to the rapidly expanding body of scholarship, the best of it anticipatory, on the pandemic and what comes afterward. Serious investigators will want them both at hand.

Revealing Schemes: The Politics of Conspiracy in Russia and the Post-Soviet Region. By Scott Radnitz. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 264p. $99.00 cloth, $29.95 paper.

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The escalating use of conspiracy claims by populists and autocrats and the proliferation of COVID conspiracy theories among publics around the globe have made it increasingly obvious that understanding political conspiracism should be on political scientists' to-do list. Scott Radnitz takes on this task in a theoretically innovative, empirically rich, mixed-methods study of conspiracism in the post-Soviet region from 1995 to 2014. Conspiracism, as Radnitz defines it, is the use in political discourse of conspiracy claims; that is, "statement[s] alleging that (1) a small number of actors (2) were or are acting covertly (3) to achieve some malevolent end." Crucially, conspiracy claims/theories also "conflict with the most plausible explanation and … lack sufficient credible evidence" (p. 8). Using an original database of conspiracy claims in media outlets from all non-Baltic post-Soviet states, Radnitz thoroughly and deftly examines variation in conspiracism over time (it increases in sporadic bursts) and across space (it is highest in Russia, lowest in Turkmenistan). Radnitz's theory about the sources of conspiracism starts

from a necessary condition: "the scarcity of established, trusted institutions that can adjudicate political discourse and potentially deter claims made in bad faith" (p. 175). He then identifies two main driving forces of conspiracism: intense political competition in a polarized polity and destabilizing events. His evidence shows convincingly that conspiracy claims are more likely to be advanced by vulnerable incumbents in competitive regimes. These incumbents often have to fight for their political life in dirty elections, which sometimes include foreign meddling. Conspiracy claims are also a useful tool for externalizing blame for major destabilizing events and for signaling continued strength by flaunting access to privileged information.

After examining the causes, the book explores the effects of conspiracism on public attitudes and political behavior through focus groups, surveys, and survey experiments in Georgia and Kazakhstan—two countries with different geopolitical orientations (pro-Western Georgia vs. pro-Russian Kazakhstan) and regime type (competitive weakly democratic Georgia vs. consolidated authoritarian Kazakhstan). The evidence suggests that post-Soviet publics' receptiveness to conspiracy claims is a double-edged sword for elites: the potential for successful conspiratorial propaganda is always there and makes the tool attractive, but publics often do not trust the messenger and may replace official conspiratorial narratives with antigovernment ones. Even more worrying for would-be conspiratorial propagandists is the finding that conspiracy beliefs may actually bring people together and make them more socially engaged and more likely to take antigovernment action. This is an important counterintuitive finding, which should be further tested in other contexts.

Radnitz's book is a major, path-breaking contribution to the growing field of the politics of conspiracism. It shows elegantly and convincingly that conspiracy beliefs should no longer be examined predominantly as individual psychological predispositions or as historically determined cultural constants in certain regions. Their frequency varies sharply over time and is politically determined. The book should be required reading for anyone interested in the politics of the post-Soviet region. It covers an extended period and discusses major destabilizing events in the region in a balanced, thorough, and accessible way. Anyone interested in executing a mixed-method, broadly comparative project should also use this book as a model. Radnitz carefully discusses and justifies case selection at each step and considers a variety of alternative explanations for the different pieces of his empirical puzzle.

Most broadly, any political scientist working on the relationship between political competition and the strength and resilience of important democratic institutions should be reading this book. Political competition is sometimes credited with having salutary effects on the

performance of democratic institutions; for example, robust political competition is supposed to reduce corruption, increase state capacity, bolster independent judiciaries, and produce better economic policies. Radnitz's book, on the contrary, contributes to theorizing the dark side of intense political competition in the context of hybrid regimes. He convincingly shows that more competitive regimes tend to feature more conspiracy-peddling politicians, rather than fewer.

A final notable asset of this book is that it treats post-Soviet politicians and publics as rational, strategic actors who evaluate claims systematically, rather than as agency-poor individuals beholden to an implicitly "backward" and immutable political culture. Somewhat ironically, the last asset exposes a potential vulnerability of the book's argument. What if leaders embrace certain conspiracies not for strategic reasons but because they sincerely believe them to be true? How could we (and should we) distinguish empirically between the two possibilities? The book does not delve into these questions, perhaps because finding an empirical strategy is very challenging. The proposed relationship between the intensity of political competition and rising conspiracism works with both mechanisms: competition may be driving actors to adopt conspiracism for strategic reasons, but it could also make it likelier that actors would increasingly embrace conspiracism as a result of the dirty competition that we know is real. For example, the fact that Shevardnadze and Putin did not initially frame the Rose Revolution as a Western conspiracy, but later did, is consistent both with the strategic use of conspiracies and with the leaders' changing perceptions/interpretations of past events. Especially, in Shevardnadze's case, what strategic use could he get out of the conspiracy after he was already ousted? Is it not equally likely that he came to believe that he had been ousted by a conspiracy as a way of coming to terms with his failure to retain power?

A related issue is that politicians and the public may genuinely believe some conspiracy theories because they are very much true. Radnitz does recognize this possibility in several spots in the book but treats the issue as moot. As long as the claim lacks sufficient credible evidence and is not the most plausible explanation, it remains a conspiracy theory only until proven otherwise. This is a fair position, but I would argue that both "credible" and "plausible" are in the eye of the beholder. Therefore, separating conspiracy claims/theories from actual conspiracies is extremely difficult in the context of highly corrupt polities, both for actors making sense of events on the go and even for scholars with the benefit of hindsight. A task for future research is then to examine the interaction of baseless and potentially real conspiracy claims, the variation in the ratio between the two types over time, and the effects of each type on political behavior and attitudes. One marker of a great contribution to

scholarship is starting a debate and raising interesting questions for future research, and Scott Radnitz has overfulfilled this goal with his excellent book.

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Historically, discussions of politics in Africa have focused on a desire to understand the concepts of state weakness and disorder seen to persist in the African state. Often this disorder is treated as unpredictable, without reason, and, ultimately, arbitrary. In *Arbitrary States: Social Control and Modern Authoritarianism in Museveni's Uganda*, Rebecca Tapscott moves us beyond Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg's 1984 treatment of disorder, in which the arbitrariness of the African state is seen as an unfortunate byproduct of its colonial legacy. Tapscott instead introduces us to a theory of arbitrary governance that positions political disorder as institutionalized to achieve regime stability and project authoritarian power. Rather than inadvertent, Tapscott argues that institutionalized arbitrariness should be seen as a central strategy in the consolidation and propagation of authoritarian rule.

In *Arbitrary States*, Tapscott introduces the reader to the concepts of arbitrary governance and institutional arbitrariness. In her discussion, arbitrary "refers to a ruler's unchecked and unaccountable power, exercised in such a way that those affected cannot predict or understand how power is wielded and have no means of questioning or challenging it" (p. 6). In Uganda, this arbitrariness can manifest in state support for vigilante groups, competing institutional arrangements that muddy questions of jurisdiction, and the delegation of state power to local and tribal authorities. Rather than a historically predetermined condition, Tapscott identifies "unpredictability as a key tool that helps today's authoritarians maintain a balance between democratic institutions and arbitrary power" (p. 5). In this way, institutional arbitrariness becomes a "mode of governance through which the state produces a self-policing population that can be alternatively demobilized and remobilized" (p. 6), thereby helping hybrid regimes navigate the trappings of democracy while still maintaining control.

Tapscott uses the case of Uganda under Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Movement (NRM) party to illustrate and explore her theory. Drawing on dynamic and well-written vignettes, as well as extensive fieldwork in four sites across Uganda, Tapscott traces institutional arbitrariness in the Ugandan Police Force through the