

POLITICAL SCIENCE FICTION

*Expert Monitors, Excessive Skepticism,
and Preventive Rationality*

A few days after September 11th, 2001, George W. Bush declared a national Day of Reflection. This moment of contemplation, while infused with sentiments of mourning and grief, also coincided with another kind of national reflection. On September 26, then-White House spokesperson Ari Fleischer announced that Americans should “watch what they say.” This self-monitoring of thought, especially around the limits of dissent, took on a spectacular prominence at that conjuncture, but it has a longer history. And in many cases recently these limits have been articulated to conspiracy thinking.

This chapter traces some of the foundational texts that made rationality a crucial factor for conspiracy panics in defining proper forms of consent and dissent. I begin with a brief summary of the writings of Harold Lasswell, Richard Hofstadter, and others in the mid- to late 1960s as the groundwork for contemporary conspiracy panics. I then survey more recent interpreters of the “paranoid style,” “political paranoia,” or “conspiracism.” Explored here are the conceptual contexts that produce, and ultimately get reinforced by, conspiracy panics.

The chapter will be a close reading of these expert texts, focusing on the following conspiracy panic issues: domestic political extremism, forms of dissent, and dominant styles of thought. I argue that the concern over conspiracy theories (old and new) is closely linked to panics over extremist political activity. From the scares over communists and Birchites in the 1960s to the alarm over militias and terrorists since the mid 1990s, public discussions have intertwined a form of thought (irrational conspiracy theories) with a form of political activity (extremism). In doing so, knowledges are presented as inherently dangerous, certain styles of dissent are disqualified, and new forms of consent are forged. I examine the effects of these mainstream problematizations on contemporary parameters of dissent.

How do liberal political rationalities attempt to organize thought? Examining these conspiracy panics illuminates current efforts to produce “reasonable politics.”

HAROLD LASSWELL AND PREVENTIVE POLITICAL RATIONALITY

Harold D. Lasswell’s pioneering work in the field of political psychology in the 1930s and 1940s, especially his construction of political personality types, sets the conceptual stage for later conspiracy panics. While certainly not the first to use psychological methods and concepts to define political phenomena, Lasswell is perhaps the most systematic, sophisticated, and influential thinker to advance political psychology. As Lasswell himself indicates, the field of social psychology had already begun in piecemeal fashion to expand into the domain of politics. In addition, it had only been a decade since World War I, a war in which propaganda and psychological warfare were key components (and out of which Lasswell himself emerged). This spurred whole new fields of study, including political psychology. Here I examine *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930) and *Power and Personality* (1948), major works that span two decades of Lasswell’s research into the psychologization of politics.

The preface to *Psychopathology and Politics* announces Lasswell’s departure from his previous attention to propaganda techniques. He now seeks to “discover what developmental experiences are significant for the political traits and interests of the mature. This means that we want to see what lies *behind* agitators, administrators, theorists, and other types who play on the public stage” (p. 8). Through the method of life history, Lasswell seeks to isolate the personality traits and contextual determinants of different political types.

Lasswell makes no claims to scientific neutrality. His research is explicitly defined as practical and interventionist. The chapter “A New Technique of Thinking” expresses Lasswell’s concern with his social and political context. According to him, we are witnessing a deterioration of reason: “In spite of our best efforts to disseminate logicity, people are always ‘letting their prejudices run away with them,’ even when they have a baggage of good intentions” (p. 31). But a response to the decline of reason does not simply entail giving a logic antidote. He contends, “our faith in logic is misplaced. . . . The supposition that emotional aberrations are to be conquered by heroic doses of logical thinking is a mistake. The absence of effective logic is a symptom of a disease which logic itself cannot cure” (p. 31).

Rather than responding to these conditions with “more and better logic,” Lasswell argues for psychoanalysis and the construction of Freudian case studies. A kind of reason does prevail, however, as the analyst interprets and sorts subjects’ stories, desires, and images into categorical types with personality traits. We see this recoding of free fantasy a little later in the book. While discussing the prominence of “hate” in politics, Lasswell finds

that it emanates from a “private motive”: “a repressed and powerful hatred of authority . . . in relation to the father” (p. 75).¹ Displaced from “family objects to public objects,” private motives are rationalized by the agitator as “public interests” (p. 75).

Marking his particular fixation on political agitators, Lasswell devotes two chapters to the subject (the latter called simply “Political Agitators—Continued”). These case studies, reported in lyrical detail, produce a typological profile of the agitator’s essential traits: high value on public emotional response, narcissism, and suspicion. Excessive suspicion is a key characteristic. Lasswell states that “ever on the alert for pernicious intrusions of private interest into public affairs, the agitator sees ‘unworthy’ motives where others see the just claims of friendship” (p. 79). This exaggerated mistrust will reappear in later problematizations of the paranoid style as “hypersuspicion,” which signals a kind of extremism.

Important here is the fact that Lasswell accuses agitators of engaging in a type of what we examined in the introduction as *dietrology* (seeking causes behind events). At the same time, he himself performs dietrology in classifying personality types/motivations. I say this not simply to turn the tables on Lasswell, but to pinpoint a moment where different kinds of dietrology are being demarcated. Reasonable forms of “behind-ology” trump unreasonable ones. Even more, reasonable forms *apply their form of dietrology* to the unreasonable ones, thus determining the field of engagement between them.

Lasswell’s commitment to interventionist research is especially evident in “The Politics of Prevention,” a chapter devoted to reorienting politics and knowledge production toward the prevention of conflict. As Lasswell puts it:

The time has come to abandon the assumption that the problem of politics is the problem of promoting discussion among all the interests concerned in a given problem. . . . The problem of politics is less to solve conflicts than to prevent them; less to serve as a safety valve for social protest than to apply social energy to the abolition of recurrent sources of strain in society. . . . The politics of prevention draws attention squarely to the central problem of reducing the level of strain and maladaptation in society. (pp. 196–197)

Conceptually and practically, Lasswell’s fusion of psychology with politics is designed to prevent conflict and dissent, and therefore to normalize politics: “Some of these human results will be deplored as ‘pathological,’ while others will be welcomed as ‘healthy’ ” (p. 200).² An obvious effect of psychopolitics is the labeling of some political knowledge as maladjusted or deviant. But equally important is Lasswell’s call to identify and head off trends *before* they coalesce into movements.

Lasswell’s reliance on the discipline of psychology signals another main point: he does not seek direct State intervention into political activities. Preventive politics

does not depend on a series of changes in the organization of government. It depends upon a reorientation in the minds of those who think about society around the central problems: What are the principal factors which modify the tension level of the community? What is the specific relevance of a proposed line of action to the temporary and permanent modification of that tension level? (p. 198)

The fostering of preventive politics falls to society's problematizers, those experts who can produce authoritative visions and diagnoses of society. Changing the nature of the problems they construct is paramount, for "achieving the ideal of preventative politics depends . . . upon improving the methods and education of social administrators and social scientists" (p. 203). Special training of professionals is needed: A "different type of education will become necessary for those who administer society or think about it," Lasswell writes, "thorough curricular reconstructions will be indispensable" (pp. 201–202).

Preventive Rationality

Lasswell's prescriptions are historically consonant with liberalism's strategy of governing through the figure of the "expert." According to Foucauldian scholars Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne, and Nikolas Rose (1996) experts have been crucial to the development of forms of governance (pp. 12–15), and have provided for liberalism "particular conceptions of the objects to be governed" (Rose, 1996, p. 42). To scientists and intellectuals is granted a certain amount of autonomy to enable "action at a distance" and legitimate the workings of the State without direct intervention (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996, pp. 10–11). Empowered with the authority to problematize the state of affairs, experts link technical knowledge with political practice in several ways: First, they provide government with new objects and subjects of governance and second, they legitimate political programs in the name of scientific authority. Governing partially operates through these expert reflections that are not just ideas: they seek to become practicable by connecting with governmental procedures and apparatuses (Rose, 1996, p. 41).

Lasswell's new expert, the "administrator-investigator," largely operates within this paradigm of liberal expertise. Politics is not a matter of State-oriented intervention, coercion, or mediation of conflicting interests. Rather, Lasswell's preemptive program, relies on the authority of "autonomized" scientists and researchers who "will be intimately allied to general medicine, psychopathology, physiological psychology, and related disciplines" (p. 203). In Nikolas Rose's words (1999), these preventative governing operations include "the calculated modulation of conduct according to principles of optimization of benign impulses and minimization of malign impulses" (p. 234). The administrator-investigator belongs to a politics of "primary prevention . . . a whole programme of political intervention to educate authorities and lay persons so as to act on the conditions which exacerbate the

possibilities of . . . problems occurring in the first place” (p. 235). In a move that foreshadows future conspiracy panics (and a general shift in governance), Lasswell’s techniques of managing dissent have less to do with repressing or eliminating dangerous deviants from the social body than with producing experts who could assess the conditions necessary for the prevention of agitation. As a form of dissent management, the goal is to nip certain conditions’ growth in the bud—to detect and thereby neutralize an emergence before it can coalesce, something Melinda Cooper (2006) later calls a war strategy of “pre-empting emergence.” *Psychopathology and Politics*, then, can be seen more as a manual to prevent social agitation than an effort to demonize it, in other words a *preventive rationality*.

In this early work, the fusion of psychology and politics hinges on the ability of experts to bring it about. Lasswell’s preliminary project sets the groundwork for a broader psychopolitics by searching for motives behind political actions, applying psychoanalytic interpretive skills to individual cases, and generalizing from individuals to traits that collectively contribute to social tension. This early research is designed to change the frameworks, methods, and problems with which experts engage. Lasswell’s later work strives more explicitly to intervene into the production of proper political subjects.

While the “agitator” is an important focus of *Psychopathology and Politics*, Lasswell’s (1948) *Power and Personality* discusses political types with regard to actual and potential leaders. The “general theory of political personality” represents research whose

aim is to bring into being democratic leaders who share the basic personality structure appropriate to the elite of a society where power is subordinated to respect and to identifications with humanity. The chief difference between the “basic” citizen and the democratic leader needs to be mainly a difference of skill and not of values. (1948, p. 152)

The analysis of a “democratic leader” yields information about how to cultivate it. Of special interest in Lasswell’s prescriptions are the “non- or antidemocrats who have rejected democracy after being extensively exposed to it, or who imagine that they conform to the democratic ideal when they are undemocratic in actual conduct” (p. 152). Understanding antidemocrat types enables strategies to discourage this development: The process of developing “character, technique, and perspective” must include the creation and deployment of new and better political images for young people, especially through new media technologies (pp. 156, 172–173).

Lasswell repeats his earlier call for a cadre of experts, which now include both self-governing actors *and* institutions: “What I advocate is an act of institution building for the purpose of carrying on a vital part of the intelligence function essential to the science and policy of democracy” (pp. 168–171). Carrying out the assessment protocol developed in his earlier

work, these “social self-observatories” would be “capable of exposing the truth about the hidden destructiveness of our cultural institutions, and of reporting on the effect of experimental efforts at reformation” (p. 173). Lasswell cites Jeremy Bentham as his intellectual precursor in this matter, though notes that in Bentham’s time “the technical problems of measuring social trends were in a most rudimentary state” (pp. 238, 19f). Another name for these experts might be social watchdogs. Later this expert monitoring function, I argue, becomes commonplace within professions (like journalism) and even among dissenting groups.

With *Power and Personality*, Lasswell takes the arguments of *Psychopathology and Politics* as givens. No longer needing to convince readers to look for motives in political action, or the case-study methodology, or the pathologization of political personality types, Lasswell can effectively develop the articulation between politics and psychology. More positive and affirmative in tone, *Power and Personality* seeks strategies for developing proper subjects, rather than investigating why deviants exist. Through these two major works, Lasswell establishes the conceptual context in which the “paranoid style” emerges as a problem. In this nascent conspiracy panic, agitation is linked to a psychological state, begging for solutions that include prevention against dissent and cultivation of the reasonable.

A short and strange moment occurs late in *Power and Personality*, a moment whose brevity reveals much about the future trajectory of “political paranoia.” The chapter “Leadership Principles: Reduce Provocation” elaborates the different “breaking points” in individuals. These are the subjective vulnerabilities that need to be met with external, institutional support to maintain the democratic personality. A few pages into the relatively detached discussion of manageable characteristics and useful techniques, a section called “The Menace of the Paranoid in the Atomic Age” suddenly interrupts the smooth flow of technopolicy discourse. Lasswell writes:

In coping with our present-day difficulties in the hope of reducing provocative-ness, we must not lose sight of the fact that even certainty of annihilation cannot protect us from the paranoid psychotic. If we knew that another war would actually eliminate us, we would not be safe from war. All mankind might be destroyed by a single paranoid in a position of power who could imagine no grander exit than using the globe as a gigantic funeral pyre. And the paranoid need not be the leader of a great state. He can be the head of a small state or even of a small gang.

Even a modicum of security under present-day conditions calls for the discovery, neutralization and eventual prevention of the paranoid. And this calls for the overhauling of our whole inheritance of social institutions for the purpose of disclosing and eliminating the social factors that create these destructive types. (p. 184)

This remarkable little section is as anomalous as the paranoid type it discusses. The irrational announces itself irrationally: it interrupts the text, only to be followed by a return to the calm reflections on the minor provocations that need to be managed by experts. At this stage, Lasswell cannot codify paranoia; he cannot problematize it within politics (as a “type”). The political paranoid cannot be given the nuance and detail other pathologies are given: it is outside any type, a force whose power threatens to destroy not only all typology, not only all politics, but also quite literally the world itself. Lasswell still feels compelled to address this extremity, even if it demands a different tone of writing. He provides an extremist response to extremism. Paranoia here cannot be incorporated—as pure pathology, it can only be eliminated.

This conceptually unmanageable force does not remain unrepresentable for long. It eventually comes under the scrutiny of problematizers; only now, it does not appear as a personality type, but as a *style of thought*. With this I move forward fifteen years, to the germinal work of Richard Hofstadter.

HOFSTADTER AND THE SEARCH FOR A MIDDLE

Hofstadter’s classic essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” first appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1964 (a year after the assassination of John F. Kennedy). It was later expanded and reprinted in the collection called *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1967). This text has influenced generations of political scientists and historians, and any serious attention to conspiracy theories must cite it—pro or con. According to Mark Fenster (1999), Hofstadter’s essay is emblematic of a postwar liberal consensus approach to domestic political unrest, in which the pathologization of dissent prevailed. Fenster’s analysis of Hofstadter is excellent, and along with Jodi Dean’s (2000b) writings on him, comprises a devastating critique of this pathologization model. I will refer the reader to their writings and concentrate here on how Hofstadter links a style of thought to political action.

Hofstadter’s conceptual debt to Lasswell is clear: He searches for motives behind political action (specifically the “agitator’s” activities), he defines these motives as psychological (though tempers them with political history), and he abstracts particular psychological motives into collective and generalizable traits. Finally, he pathologizes them. Most importantly, Hofstadter *assumes* the legitimacy of linking psychology to politics, never feeling obliged to argue for it as Lasswell did. Indeed, political psychology has become such a dominant discourse that Hofstadter is compelled to distinguish his work from its typological research. He argues that in

using the expression “paranoid style,” I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes. I have neither the competence

nor the desire to classify any figures of the past or present as certifiable lunatics. . . . It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant. (pp. 3–4)

He calls this the paranoid style “simply because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind” (p. 3). Hofstadter can secure this loan in the already-accepted articulation between psychology and politics. His casual adoption of political psychology may seem to empty the paranoid style of its clinical connotations but it still carries the *authority* of psychology. His diagnosis isn’t clinical, but it is social; carrying the legitimacy of the psychopathological category out onto the social field.

For Hofstadter, it is not the content of beliefs that matters, but the *style* of thought. Style “has to do with the way in which ideas are believed and advocated rather than with the truth or falsity of their content” (p. 5). This style does not refer to particular ideas, since “any system of beliefs can be espoused in the paranoid style, [it’s just that] there are certain beliefs which seem to be espoused almost entirely this way” (p. 5f). The paranoid style is not merely the belief in a conspiracy theory—it is a worldview: “Not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a ‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy as the motive force in historical events” (p. 29). The distinction from ordinary political beliefs is not in “the absence of facts, but the leap of imagination at critical points” (p. 37). This emphasis on a worldview and a style of thought begins to give generic traits and formal coherence to a multiplicity of dissenting knowledge claims.

There are important differences from Lasswell, then. The turn from personality type to style is a shift in problematization. Problematization no longer seeks to categorize individual actors, but to establish a manner of thinking that could be taken up by *any* political actor. The pathological is no longer an easy distinction to make from the normal: As Hofstadter notes, it is “intensely rationalistic” and an “imitation of the enemy” (pp. 36, 32). The paranoid style both possesses its own characteristics and approximates the normal. It is a *mimic* of reason and thus needs constant vigilance.

Hofstadter focuses on this mimicry and proximity, and we need only go to paranoia’s etymology to see it in operation. The spatial position of the *para* is *beside* or *beyond* the noid. After all, the paranoid is not antinoid, nor exnoid, nor xenonoid. It touches the mind, being both proximate yet quite dissimilar (along similar conceptual lines as paramilitary, parapsychology, paraphrase, parallel, paranormal). The paranoid style in its domestically populist form is not simply exiled to the outside of normal political discourse; it is a danger that constantly threatens from within. While it is banished to the fringes of official thought, it is also among us, lurking within the nation, in the heartland, among the populace. It is not one of “us,” but it could be

anyone. This proximity of the paranoid style to normal thought sets the conceptual stage for future experts.

THE CONSPIRACY THEORY EXPERTS

Contemporaneous with, and in some cases influenced by, Hofstadter's essay are a range of other texts: *The Politics of Unreason: Right-wing Extremism in America, 1790–1970* (Seymour M. Lipset & Earl Raab, 1970), *The Strange Tactics of Extremism* (Harry Overstreet & Bonaro Overstreet, 1964), and *Extremism USA* (John Carpenter, 1964). More recent problematizations influenced by Hofstadter include: *Conspiracy! The Paranoid Style and Why It Flourishes* (Daniel Pipes, 1997), *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (Robert S. Robins & Jerrold M. Post, 1997), *American Extremists* (John George & Laird Wilcox, 1996), *Extremism in America* (Lynn Sargent, 1995), and *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Michael Barkun, 2003). This is of course a small sample, limited to the book-length treatments. Myriad newspaper stories, journal articles, and short essays draw from Hofstadter (especially in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*; Applebome, 1995; Johnson, 1995; Rich, 1995; Leiby, 1995; Charney, 1995; Achenbach, 2004). In various ways, these texts link conspiracy theories to domestic political extremism, forms of dissent, and dominant styles of thought. Together they comprise the conceptual dimension of conspiracy panics.

Populism/Domestic Con-fusion

Many of these panics appear to respond to conjunctural moments of political destabilization, with particular emphases on unruly populism and political confusion. Beginning with Hofstadter, the paranoid style is intimately linked with populism. Hofstadter accounted for the booming popularity of conspiracy theories in the 1960s by tracing them through U.S. history. Dating back to the American Revolution, these irrational thoughts accompanied populist grumblings, leading to paranoid social behavioral patterns, such as the formation of the Anti-Masonic Party in the early 19th century (pp. 14–19). While present at the founding of the nation, the paranoid style is not a constant presence—it has “successive episodic waves” of heightened activity (p. 39).

Even while Hofstadter claims that the paranoid style is not exclusive to American politics, his essay can be seen as a moment in a lineage of reflections on “The American.” From the impressionistic interpretations of Crèvecoeur around the time of American Independence through Alexis De Tocqueville's classic *Democracy in America* and onward, meditations on “The American Character,” the “American Style,” and the “American Identity” have preoccupied analysts. This brief history of European intellectuals defining and appraising “the American” eventually gets taken over by “internal”

reflection, continuing through such research as “culture and personality studies” in the social sciences and “American character” studies in the humanities (McGiffert, 1964).

More than just establishing the content of “Americanness,” the very fact and form of the problematizations may themselves be a feature of Americanness. Taking the American as object and subject of reflection is itself part of political identity formation. Often, this evaluation includes the identification and location of the “un-American” within, especially when discussing the limits of dissent (as a “balancing” of liberty and security). The un-American is not necessarily an “alien,” though it has been historically defined as such. At various times, this internal transgressor is a traitor, rebel, subversive, defector, insurgent, seditious dissident, rabble rouser, or sympathizer.

While there are a few examples of research done on extremism and political paranoia from an international perspective (most notably Pipes), the vast majority of problematizations articulate the paranoid style and political extremism to an American context (George & Wilcox, 1996; Halpern & Levin, 1996; Gardner, 1997; Sargent, 1995; McGiffert, 1964; Schlesinger, 1962; Archer, 1969). With titles like *Extremism USA*, *American Extremists*, *Extremism in America*, *The Extremists: Gadflies of American Society*, and Hofstadter’s essay (which is the first to articulate extremism and Americanness with paranoia), one can see the preoccupation with the national quality of extremist dissent. The refrain in these works, that extremism and the paranoid style have existed in America since its inception, makes it easy to argue that the problematizations on extremist dissent and conspiracism are bound up with the self-reflection that composes the “American” style.

For Hofstadter, the cold war 1960s was another moment when America’s paranoid style was spiking. But he located something peculiar to this reemergence: This is a “new phenomenon; the threat is not foreign, but home-grown” (p. 24). While Hofstadter is speaking about the enemies constructed within the paranoid style, we can flip this to include the ways the paranoid style itself is turned *into* an enemy.” The paranoid style is not traceable to a “foreign” element.

Much of the dissent-management strategies of the 20th century, or as Michael Rogin (1987) calls them “countersubversive practices against dissent,” worked via xenophobia (p. 4). They were directed at an alien other, whose potential for infiltration into the native has been used to justify crack-downs on subversives. From the repression of immigrant working-class movements (where the immigrant was defined as an agent of foreign interests) to the more obvious Red Scares (in which an external communist force was targeted), domestic dissent has been typically problematized around the security of national borders from external invasion. In the case of the paranoid style, however, no outside force is culpable: it is domestic and popular. Once the threat is located *within* national political identity, a new countersubversive framework is required to render this danger intelligible.

And what exactly is the danger? According to the Overstreets (1964), the primary threat is that “too many moderates will be pulled from the center” (p. 14). This “working impatience with dissent” betrays a fear not of external invasion, or even of a well-mounted movement by an already formed group (Lipset & Raab, p. 3). Rather, the fear is that otherwise normal political actors will be drawn *away from* the moderate center and into more radical forms of politics. The concern is both with extremism as such and with its potential attractiveness to moderates.³

A foreign invader can more readily be demonized as Other, as its very alienness places it outside the political system *from the outset*. But a domestic political paranoid or extremist is harder to position as Other given that they are “one of us.” Domestic extremists are considered too close to, yet alienated from, normal political processes. They resemble the people, while at the same time threatening to *become* the people. Whereas the xenophobic discourse focused on *infiltration* (the external masquerades as internal, They pretend to be Us), these new conceptions stress *division* (the internal is split, the middle is replicated in extremis, some of Us menacingly resemble the rest of Us). One can begin to see how a panic forms around this boundary confusion and the camouflaged indeterminacy of the new extremism.

More recent problematizations of the paranoid style also articulate it to populism, but with new inflections. In the late 1990s, the term *conspiracism* began to gain currency (see Daniel Pipes, 1997). Conspiracism sheds some of the psychological connotations of a term like paranoia in favor of a pejorative link to political ideas and practices (Marxism, fascism) and dangerous sentiments (racism, anti-Semitism). Conspiracism is at times used interchangeably with the paranoid style (including Pipes, 1997). The paranoid style as conspiracism is linked to four developments:

1. new motivations (hate speech, resentful backlashes, histories of oppression)
2. new targets (globalization, new surveillance technologies),
3. new kinds of groups (African Americans who believe that AIDS and the crack epidemic are genocidal strategies against them, and militia organizations who fear a New World Order enough to take up arms in defense), and
4. new visibility in popular culture (Hollywood films, TV shows, magazines, websites, books). (Pipes, 1997, p. 17)

Conspiracy panic texts that focus on populism often highlight the fact that conspiracism permeates both the Left and the Right. In the 1960s studies (including Hofstadter, Lipset and Raab, and the Overstreets), the paranoid style is deemed to be primarily a right-wing phenomenon, while the Left is merely susceptible to it. The more recent analyses of both political paranoia and extremism stress a bipolar condition. Perhaps most famously

captured in Michael Kelly's (1995) term *fusion paranoia*, the convergence of political wings in the conspiracy theory milieu marks the research of the 1990s (Nina J. Easton, 1995). George and Wilcox (1996) chronicle this tendency and signal it in their book's title, *American Extremists: Militias, Supremacists, Klansmen, Communists and Others*, and Pipes (1997) analyzes it systematically (especially pp. 154–170).⁴

I will briefly note here that there is a more interesting fusion of Left and Right going on, one at the level of the problematizations themselves. When it came to panics over the militia movement, concern about conspiracism produced strange bedfellows, positioning Left/liberal commentators with the state in calling for stricter regulations and increased surveillance powers. But this is not that unusual if one recognizes that the “opposition” shares the same form of thought, or problematization. I explore this convergence of Left and Right in conspiracy panics, and ultimately in contemporary political rationality, in chapters 4 and 5.

The concern over “fusion paranoia” is not primarily about the Left/Right binary, however, but about center/margins, or mainstream/fringes. The problem is not in a given conspiracy theory's political affiliation, but rather in the moment when elements gravitate from the mainstream to the extreme *at either end*, and then return to infiltrate and seduce that mainstream. The anxiety is over “popular confusion,” a troubled political spectrum, a once-legitimate categorizing system disrupted (Carpenter, 1964, p. 1). In general, this scenario of destabilization represents unruly political populism that requires innovative governing strategies. As mentioned above, the domesticity of the paranoid style and extremism requires an incessant *division*—conceptualizing paranoia by distinguishing it from the mainstream. It is this internal, self-reflexive sorting procedure to which I now turn, examining in some detail the definitions, themes, and characteristics assigned to the paranoid style, political paranoia, and conspiracism.

THE EXAGGERATED MASQUERADE: PROBLEMATIZING A STYLE OF THOUGHT

Hofstadter, as I have discussed, notes that political paranoids are not clinically deranged: it is the very “use of the mode by more or less normal people that makes it significant” (p. 4). The paranoid style can be isolated as an object of thought, but its difference is one of degree not kind. Differentiated by its form, the paranoid style remains close enough to commonsensical ideas as to be able to house their contents and *de-form* them.

Numerous other commentators take up this proximity. For the Overstreets (1964), extremism is an “nth degree *exaggeration* of traits common among us in gradations” (p. 20, italics added). For George and Wilcox (1997), the “difference between the average person and the political extremist is largely one of degree and not of kind” (p. 9). Following this line of

thought, Robert Robins and Jerrold Post (1997) describe the paranoid as “not having fully departed the world of reality. Rather, the paranoid clings to a part of that world . . . it is a pathological *exaggeration* . . . a *form of adaptation gone wrong*” (p. 19, italics added). The political paranoid is “perfectly normal except for delusions of conspiracy and victimization” (p. 4). Hofstadter concurs with this when he defines the paranoid style in relation to normally functioning rationality: the paranoid style can be seen as an “imitation of the enemy. . . . It is nothing if not coherent [and] intensely rationalistic” (pp. 32, 36). What emerges again and again in these texts is the theme that political paranoia is a hyperbolic mimic of mainstream thought.

In addition, these problematizers warn that this mimicry can return to the mainstream and *masquerade* as legitimate. According to the Overstreets, it is the “nature of extremism to go in for protective coloration. It disguises itself as moderate” (p. 15). This imitation is more pernicious than “blatantly delusional thinking” since it is “far more dangerous . . . when the *delusional thinking is borderline* and consequently not easily recognized” (Robins & Post, pp. 19–22; italics added). We again find ourselves at the boundary between the noid and the paranoid: not noid/paranoid, but noid/noid, where the / is the para.

Robins and Post provide an example of this masquerade, comparing two people they encounter on a Washington D.C. intersection handing out pamphlets (pp. 20–22). On one corner, a follower of Lyndon Larouche distributes literature on an international conspiracy. On the other, a man wearing a sandwich board warns about the evils of government mind control. The latter is easily recognizable as a delusional paranoid, while the former pretends to be a legitimate political actor. Once again, the problem of differentiation is posed: the paranoid style is not essentially different from the normal, but is both a fantastic exaggeration of it (in its form) and a simulation (in its masked appearance).

Pipes (1997) also has much to say about this mimicry. In the chapter “House of Mirrors” he borrows a definition of the paranoid style as the “secret vice of the rational mind” and argues that it is seductive because it takes the form of “pseudoscholarship” (p. 34). The entire chapter addresses the “difficulty in distinguishing the real from the imaginary” and how it is “maddeningly difficult to keep [conspiracism] in focus” (p. 20). Pipes begins to perform a sorting operation upon the problem: “Reader and author alike need markers to distinguish the solid ground of fact from the swamp of fantasy, for it is this insidiousness that permits conspiracism to spread from the extremes to the mainstream” (p. 38).

Pipes embodies the normal or noid style of thought, one that seeks division between the rational and its simulated excess but does not concern itself with distinguishing true from false (that is to say, with falsifying conspiracy theories). To do so would place conspiracy narratives squarely within the regime of truth (in the sense that they *could be* true or false). To paraphrase a line from scientific dismissals of pseudoscience, conspiracy narratives are

“not even false” (Hitchens, 2005).⁵ The goal, rather, is to differentiate a style of thought from the very style that *composes* the regime of truth (the rational style that *can* distinguish true from false).

Most significantly, this differentiation is difficult to accomplish because the paranoid style is in seductive proximity to the noid style—a deformation, an excessive mimicry, a phantasmic exaggeration of the ordinary. This exaggeration is akin to what Gilles Deleuze (1990c) calls the “unjust pretender.” Unlike the copy (which even if it fails to resemble the model is a just pretender), the simulation operates without reference to the model:

It is built upon dissimilarity, implying essential perversion or deviation. . . . That to which they pretend, they pretend to underhandedly, under cover of an aggression, an insinuation, a subversion, “against the father” and without passing through the Idea. Theirs is an unfounded pretension. (256–257)

That is, the simulation does not resemble, it dissembles, it is an image without resemblance.

Metaphysical thought, in Deleuze’s reading, has as its mission “to distinguish the true pretender from the false one” in order to assure the “triumph of the copies over simulacra, of . . . keeping [simulacra] completely submerged, preventing them from . . . ‘insinuating themselves’ everywhere” (pp. 254, 247). And why does the simulacra need to be detected and domesticated? The simulacra “places in question the very notation of copy and model” (p. 256). It “harbors a positive power which denies *the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction*. . . . The same and similar no longer have an essence except as *simulated*” (p. 262, italics original).

What the simulation does is reveal the sorting procedure itself to be simulated (as an unfounded and unfixed activity). This is the threat to a regime whose authority is founded on these distinctions (i.e., true/false, but more importantly, inside/outside true). Banishing the simulation would thus erase the *simulatedness* of the regime, because simulation would be defined as an activity that is “other” to the regime.

This concept of simulacra gives us a better sense of conspiracy panics’ problematizations of political paranoia as a style of thought. The copy, or the just pretender, can be contained within the mainstream regime of politics and truth. It is a false knowledge that can be debunked through the official procedures of distinguishing truth from falsity.⁶ The model is preserved and even invigorated as the copy is still measured up against it (as failure). But paranoia, whose proximity and ability to mimic normal modes is its precise threat, is “not even false.” It has no measure—it suspects even the system that would measure. And this proximate masquerade becomes acute when we examine these panics within liberal political rationality.

The etymology of the term *paranoia* even speaks to this characteristic. From the Greek *para* and *nous*, paranoia is defined as *beyond* or *beside* the

mind. It is out there, yet adjacent to here. It resembles the noid, while at the same time threatening to *become* the noid. This nearness spurs the conspiracy panics and the problematizations it engenders.

LIBERALISM'S EXAGGERATION

Skepticism

In the accounts above, what is it precisely that gets hyperbolized in the paranoid style? Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab (1970) locate a paradox in political extremism: "The same values and moral commitments that have been the constant strength of our democratic life (individualism, antistatism, egalitarianism) . . . provide the substance of extremist threats to that democratic life" (p. 30). According to these researchers, "extremist movements have been powerfully spawned by the same American characteristics that finally reject them" (p. 30). Lipset and Raab are content to leave this shared set of characteristics as a "paradox" and a curious contradiction.

According to Robert Robins and Jerrold Post the "primary distortion is of the necessary suspiciousness in American politics," an "exaggeration of the tried political style of alert suspicion" (pp. 5, 18). They go on to claim that political paranoia "distorts conventional and useful responses to danger. . . . It is a malignant distortion of an otherwise adaptive response, a useful mode of behavior that has misfired, a dangerous and destructive parody of prudent coping behavior" (p. 18). Robins and Post, in the panic rhetoric over mimicry, assert that what is at stake is the preservation of a particular degree of skepticism. Healthy political suspicion must be saved from its parodic deformers who threaten to take it away to the extremes.

For Daniel Pipes (1997), this excess reaches its pinnacle in the conspiracist statement "appearances deceive," in which even "the most benign governments in human experience (the British and the American) [are turned] into the most terrible" (p. 48). What emerges from his pages is the sense that skepticism turns into suspicion, into a lack of trust in the basic integrity of Western governing.⁷ Pipes argues that it is ironically those nations "with a substantial body of opinion that suspects . . . its own government [which are] most targeted by conspiracism" (p. 174). But this is more than irony—it returns us to the logic of exaggeration, excess, and simulation at the heart of conspiracy panics.

In a twist on Pipes's assessment of the Americanness of conspiracism, Jodi Dean (2000b) argues that conspiracy thinking was present as a foundational suspicion that produced America as a nation and people. During the revolutionary phase, conspiracy theories were the lingua franca for understanding tyrannical political machinations. Only later, with the post-revolutionary rise of consensus politics and pluralist values did conspiracy narratives become associated with irrationality and extremism. In order to

expand Dean's assessment, we can explore the centrality and persistence of skepticism within liberal modes of governance, especially as it is modified in accordance with limits and excess.

The Moderate Ethos of Self-Reflection

Political suspicion is a component of liberalism's ethos of permanent self-criticism. To be free in liberal governance one must employ a vigorous skepticism upon governmental activities. According to Michel Foucault, liberalism is not a theory or an ideology, but "a practice . . . regulating itself by means of a sustained reflection" (Foucault, 1997a, p. 74). Its principle of reflection is that "one always governs too much, or, at any rate, one always must suspect that one governs too much. Governing should not be exercised without a 'critique'" (p. 74). Liberalism is "a tool for criticizing reality," and "a form of critical reflection on governmental practice" (pp. 75, 77). It is a "constant reflection on and criticism of what is. Its internal regulative principle is seen as the need to maintain a suspicious vigilance over government so as to check its permanent tendency to exceed its brief in relation to what determines both its necessity and limits—society" (Burchell, 1991, p. 143). As a mode of governing defined around self-reflection, liberalism takes its own activity and its limits as objects of concern. Liberalism has an ingenious suppleness because of this, as it allows for a self-modification through perpetual self-problematization.

And how does it do so? At least since John Locke, governmentalized freedom has been linked to the "use of Reason" (Barry Hindess, 1996, p. 129). Liberalism is concerned to ensure that people's public and private behavior will be conducted according to appropriate standards of civility, reason, and orderliness, without state regulation (Cruikshank, 1999; Gordon, 1991). In Hindess's view, developing "appropriate habits of thought and behavior" is crucial to liberalism's "indirect regulation" (pp. 129–130). This political subject would become responsible through reasoning, especially through responsible reasoning. And via this self-reflexive subjectification, the political actor locates its source and parameters for freedom. Liberal political rationality thus signifies both a form of governing (governing at a distance, indirect regulation) and its content (a subjectification that relies on the exercise of reason and thought).

In his classic work *The Public Philosophy*, Walter Lippman (1955) explicitly acknowledges this double meaning, claiming that "a rational order is not only an attractive and a sublime conception but . . . a necessary assumption in the government of large and heterogeneous states" (p. 83). Reason does not transcend its material conditions, but is immanent to the mode of governance that finds it useful. This is a specifically liberal reason, highlighting procedural matters in a pluralistic society: "It is not possible to reject this faith in the efficacy of reason and at the same time to believe that communities of men enjoying freedom could govern themselves successfully" (p. 102–103).

The liberal arrangement of freedom and rationality also entails a certain relation to a regime of truth. According to governmentality studies scholar Nikolas Rose (1999), the mechanisms of “the conduct of conduct that have taken shape in the West, and those strategies that contest them, are ineluctably drawn to rationalize themselves according to a value of truth” (p. 24). Conducting oneself as a citizen is thus not simply a behavioral matter; it requires an active and persistent self-problematization, one that is operable only through a certain style of thought (a relationship between truth and reason). Self-criticism is not just tolerated—it is a motor of liberalism’s flexibility, “polymorphism and its recurrences” (Foucault, 1997a, p. 75).

A *reasonable* skepticism is thus a crucial element in liberalism’s mode of governing. But an exaggerated and deformed one can threaten the very political structure that requires critical reflection. Robins and Post’s “Save Our Skepticism” campaign, as a type of conspiracy panic, calls for a *moderate* suspicion, one well within the boundaries of a regime of truth. It is this set of acceptable limits for skepticism (and thereby dissent) that is at stake in these problematizations (the paranoid style, political paranoia, and conspiracism) within liberal political rationality.

Reason, the Regime of Truth, and the Marketplace of Ideas

For Lipset and Raab (1970), it is “an American article of faith that because of the ultimate efficacy of human reason, error is legitimate and tolerable. A direct attack on the popular properties of human reason has never been politically possible in America” (p. 6). Extremism, as a politics of unreason, is precisely defined as this attack on reason. Lipset and Raab here are also staking a claim on a *popular rationality* (the widespread properties of human reason), which may be different from a *populist* rationality (in Foucault’s sense of subjugated knowledges being popular knowledges). The governmental link between rationality and dissent was forged even before the terms *extremism* and *conspiracism* were coined. In a section of *The Public Philosophy* titled “The Limits of Dissent,” Walter Lippman (1955) argues that the “borderline between sedition and radical reform is between the denial and the acceptance of the principle of the public philosophy: that we live in a rational order in which by sincere inquiry and rational debate we can distinguish the true and the false” (p. 102).

Conspiracy theories refuse to recognize “error” and instead ascribe evil intentions to political actors (Lipset & Raab, pp. 7, 14). Through their hypersuspicion, conspiracy theories attack the liberal model of reason as they are “designed to legitimate the closing down of the ideational market place” (p. 17). Their tactics employ “not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all out crusade” (Hofstadter, 29). Extremism is “antipluralism” (Lipset & Raab, p. 6), a monism in which “paranoids do not have adversaries or rivals or opponents; they have enemies” (Robins & Post, p. 5). In a sense, the loyal opposition has become alienated and agitational: they “share a

contempt for rational political discussion and constitutional legal solutions” (in this quote, the characteristic is ascribed to 1960s campus leftists). (Lipset & Raab, p. 12).

In these texts we can see a close connection forged between political action and rationality: Extremism as such is not violent action or conflict with particular values (individualism, freedom, or equality). Rather, extremism is the very refusal to subscribe to a faith in reason, to the procedures for distinguishing truth from error in opinion, and to the marketplace of ideas. Since politics is characterized as rational contest and negotiation toward consensus, Lipset and Raab can call extremism and conspiracy theories “antipolitics” (pp. 12–17). Conspiracy theories go “beyond the limits of the normative procedures which define the democratic political process” yet those procedures are being defined by the problematizers (p. 5).

It should be apparent here that conspiracy panics are not merely about ideas. They involve, at their heart, the procedures of governing. As Jodi Dean (2000b) notes, pluralist conceptions need to shore up their standing via this marketplace and its gatekeepers. In fact, as the State Department’s Strategy for Combating Terrorism makes clear, defeating terrorism involves bolstering consensus: “In place of a culture of conspiracy and misinformation, democracy offers freedom of speech, independent media, and the marketplace of ideas, which can expose and discredit falsehoods, prejudices, and dishonest propaganda.” The desire to contest the very process of contestation removes conspiracists from the field of politics and into the realm of pure threat.

Extremism is positioned as that which lies beyond the limits of the regime, yet as that which subverts the regime. Once again the issue of proximity is paramount. The other to reasonable politics is never just outside—it is at the borders, simulating and blurring the lines; it is a para-site. The panic over boundaries and viral intruders/mimics resonates well with what some have called the more pervasive “security culture” (Crandall & Armitage, 2005; Knight, 2001).

The problem is not that extremists do not share a consensual truth, but that they do not subscribe to the *regime* of political truth, where sorting truth from error is the required procedure in the marketplace of ideas. This is not about a consensus in outcome (agreement, uniformity in opinion) but consent to the rules, procedures, and forms of dissent and difference.

While liberalism’s style of thought is an ethos of self-criticism, it only allows a moderate kind, one that will dissent within the regime of truth. There are thus limits to liberal self-critique and on the problematization of the political sphere. In the experts’ reflections, discussing the metamediaproduct (the contest over the rationale of governing procedures) is not allowable—the sphere is apolitical. Once the regime of truth is taken as an object of dissent, it automatically places the critique in extremism, as unreasonable. Reason, as an “American article of faith,” is liberalism’s procedural technique (i.e., the regime of truth operates through reason) *and* its authorizing force

(i.e., the regime of truth itself is reasonable). Reason becomes the operation guiding the *immanence* of rule where the effective performance of a rule becomes its immanent justification (Hardt & Negri, 2000).

The conspiracy panic problematizations agree that the self-critique that defines liberalism has gone awry. Political paranoia's skepticism has gone "too far"; it is an unjust pretender. The paranoid style subverts faith in the marketplace of ideas, in the link between freedom and rationality, and in the regime of truth itself. Liberal self-problematization has hypertrophied; the turn to the self has exceeded the kind of rationality required to make responsible turnings. Only a reasonable criticism is allowable, only a moderate form of modulation.

REASONABLE RESPONSES

Once this excess of skepticism has been problematized, what responses are proposed? What is interesting in all of these conspiracy panic texts, from Hofstadter to Pipes, is the fact that coercive measures (punishment, detention, repressive measures against speech) are actively disavowed. Mark Fenster (1999) argues that the pathological model of Hofstadter and his inheritors easily leads to a repressive response. However, these analyses explicitly argue that repression should not be carried out upon the paranoid style.⁸ Two reasons are given to avoid these harsh measures.

The first is tactical, as coercion "would split society even further, and thereby give extremism further draw" (Overstreet & Overstreet, 1964, p. 21). Suppressing conspiracism would create a scenario where the "paranoid person feels cast out by society, which increases their paranoia" (Robins & Post, 1997, p. 40). If "alienation from normal political processes" is a reason why paranoia flourishes, then direct suppression would only inflame the problem (Hofstadter, 1967, p. 39).

The second reservation against repressive techniques is, at first glance, less about strategy than it is about moral national integrity. Brute censorship, according to the Overstreets (1964), only happens "in totalitarian systems . . . there is an obligation to defend extremism's constitutional rights, so we cannot use coercion"; prohibition is "un-American" (p. 21). And for George and Wilcox, there is a "certain danger in the notion that we should be 'intolerant of intolerance'" (p. 10). But this is indeed a matter of strategic efficacy, as the "net effect of domestic extremism has been negligible [while] the net effect of attempts to exterminate it have been quite telling, a legacy that haunts us to this day" (p. 48). Strategies of dissent management must, thereby, be more supple and differentiated than simple repression. This is not surprising, since in a liberal art of governing "political rationality . . . replaces violence as a mode of governance" (Wendy Brown, 1998, p. 43). Given these reasons, two responses are suggested.

The First Response. One tactic advocated is to refold the extremists into the mainstream: “[We are] not trying to ostracize or liquidate extremists—we want to bring them to the center” (Overstreet & Overstreet, p. 292). George and Wilcox define their work not as an attempt “to provide a rationale for persecuting or doing away with certain ‘extremists’ . . . [but] to provide understanding of a human problem” (p. 9). A number of these problematizations refer to the usefulness of this “understanding,” from the detrimental effects of pathologization (Sargent, 1995; George & Wilcox, 1996) to the reinvigoration of the center that the challenge of extremism provides (Gardner, 1997).

This domestication would entail reaffirming a proper form of “Americanism” at the social and political level. Stabilizing forces are not in operation for society as a whole as they are for the party coalitions, ideology, and rhetoric of the American political system (Lipset & Raab, p. 508). Renewal would take place at the grassroots level, in community activism (Overstreet & Overstreet, pp. 282–287). These local and partial experiments include refamiliarizing citizens with the founding American political tracts that elaborate the “principles of government” (Carpenter, p. 203). Other suggestions include becoming active in the political process, reading the news to get acquainted with problems of the day, participating in local hearings, reaffirming religious foundations, and finally, “knowing” your enemy (Carpenter, pp. 203–208). In a way, these 1960s suggestions prefigure the 1990s calls for increasing civil society cooperation and bolstering community participation (examined in chapter 2).

Along with this rejuvenation of micropatriotism, there are calls for a macro political flexibilization. This means creating responsive institutions and a malleable political structure to absorb extremist movements (e.g., preserving the two-party system to prevent them from organizing into a third party or some other broad-based organization) (Lipset & Raab, pp. 503–504). It would also mean ensuring that the political system is “conducive to normative change—and to the orderly discussion, dissent, and conflict which are attendant on normative change” (p. 504). The key is to rejuvenate proper forms of political reason. Make room for dissent: not to eliminate it altogether in favor of consensus, but provide the authoritative framework by which to dissent and to recognize proper dissent (that is, within pluralist negotiation).⁹ At the same time, the political system must continue “ruling out direct challenges to legitimacy” (p. 504).

In addition, a key technique that would ward off the dangers of “counterextremism” is the formation of the “democratic personality” (George & Wilcox, pp. 88–91). Echoes of Lasswell’s fusion of politics and psychology can be heard here, as fostering a “nonextremist” personality would “show a better way” to extremists and their potential seductees (p. 91). The objective here would be to induce higher “levels of democratic restraint,” primarily through education, to produce “cadres of opposition to undemocratic excess”

(Lipset & Raab, p. 507). We once again see preventive rationality at work here. If the political immune system is bolstered and vigilant attention paid to potential symptoms of deviance, the styles of thought leading to extremist behavior can be modified in advance of it engendering a crisis.

In sum, this first strategy, incorporation, seeks to bring the alienated back into the fold as a way of reinvigorating the center. The management of dissent is accomplished through making the social and political body capable of absorbing challenges and by reinvigorating the sectors characterized as vulnerable. Through a strengthening of national patriotism, a revitalization of education, and flexibilization of the political structure, extremists can find a space of action within the center, *but no longer as extremists*. By definition, extremism is a rejection of that marketplace, of the center, and of the structure that attempts absorption. Thus, the attempts to tame extremism as a form of “error” cannot exhaust the possible responses to the paranoid style.

The Second Response. There is a more prevailing nonrepressive tactic in these texts. Calling for similar techniques (bolstering of education, rejuvenation of citizenship through grassroots activity and refamiliarization with America’s foundational political tracts), this response strengthens the norm by incessantly positioning the dissenter as an alien, as not one of us. Rather than bringing the outsider back into the mainstream, this conceptual strategy seeks to turn the domestic dissenter *into* an outsider, and keep it at bay. Rather than making extremism disappear (via prohibition or absorption) it is made to appear incessantly as “not-Us.” Problematization is a production of visibility, a perpetual visibility that allows a continuous renewal of judgment in the name of the mainstream (the proper American). We have shifted tactics from making dissent invisible (the totalitarian strategy) to making it visible, but only as a spectacular scapegoat.

We can see this at work in the 1995 congressional hearings on militia activity. Mark Fenster succinctly and persuasively argues that the “metaphors of exposure and release” that framed the hearings comprised a rhetoric of pathology (pp. 22–51). In this case, the scapegoat is made to appear in a public, official forum in order to “clear the air” and prevent this kind of thought and activity from festering in the dark. In a conjoining of the aural and the ocular, this “hearing” makes the unknown “visible,” working as an immunizing agent and antidote to the unclean and disease-ridden political body. The scapegoating of domestic dissent is a ritual whose goal is much like the one described by James Frazer when he describes tribal scapegoating: to secure a regime’s integrity by “cleansing the ills that are infecting a people” (1922, p. 666). Ramifications of this ritual, according to Fenster, limit the responses to populism to “strategies of containment, legislative enactments, surveillance, and policing” (p. 23). In other words, pathologization and scapegoating are not the same as direct repression: they make a problem visible in order to deploy other more nuanced strategies of neutralization.

Focusing on militias by clearing the air seeks to detect a national problem before it emerges fully blown. While easily defined as extremist, their populism was another matter. Panic over patriot populism had to walk a fine line. On the one side, the militias had to be widespread enough to constitute an actual threat. On the other side, they could not be so extensive as to be truly popular. Like a viral circulation on the verge of becoming a mature pandemic, militias had to be prevented from becoming a full-blown populist movement. The militia hearings, the most public version of this preventive rationality, sought to cut off and isolate the viral spread of the militia movement. Distinguishing it from the “public” (for instance in myriad appeals by Arlen Specter) took a potential Us-versus-Them populism and rerouted it as a consensus We who stand in judgment of a minority outsider group. Turning the militia movement from potentially popular to discursively antipublic, official problematizers (having been scolded for not detecting this “gathering storm” before the Oklahoma City bombing) now led the conspiracy panic charge with a coordinated, bipartisan, institutional preventive action.

This preventive rationality should remind us of Lasswell’s writing. An irrational dissenter is not confronted with a coherent rationality (as logical argumentation). A “return to common sense” is more than an acceptance of dominant ideas or a consent to authorities. Daniel Pipes (1997) argues: “Sound logic and superior leadership do not of their own appear sufficient to make the paranoid style fade away; more profound changes need to take place . . . *a thorough reevaluation of self*, plus fundamental changes in *thinking processes* and social perception” (pp. 184–185, italics added). The influence of Lasswell here is clear. New subjects are needed, ones that can operate reasonably on their own after being trained in proper styles of self-reflection. There is an important difference from Lasswell, however. The “social self-observatories” he prescribed are no longer simply in the hands of experts—they now become every citizen’s duty.

Governing at a distance, while requiring expertise to prescribe new techniques, cannot simply rely on it. These conspiracy panic texts are attempting to fuse reason and politics in a way that promotes a liberal technology of citizen subjectification. Reason must become part of the *ethos* of the self, a work of the self on the self. The nonrepressive responses to conspiracism are not just about making people reasonable, but making reason a *people’s enterprise*.

PROBLEMATIZING AS A STYLE OF THOUGHT

Conspiracy panic experts define conspiracy theories as a style of thought, but do so as a way of disseminating their *own* style of thought as a model. What these problematizing texts offer is not so much a set of beliefs that require agreement, or consent to their authors’ authority. These texts do not just

promote a certain value (reason) over its deviant (paranoia). They do not demand the reader's identification with a classificatory scheme. Rather, these problematizations offer up their *own* styles of thought. They display the very style of thought that the readers, as citizens, should take up when they encounter political paranoia. These are "practical" texts, "functional devices that would enable individuals to question their own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects" (Foucault, 1985, pp. 12–13). It just so happens that the reason-training manuals here take as their object the very style of thought needed to be a proper citizen. The practical texts provide prescription through example, presented as scholarly description. These are turns to thought, where thought works on thought to provide a manual for turning.

Even more, these styles are preventive; designed to encourage individuals to *detect* and *identify* political paranoia, to sort out the noid from the paranoid. To be reasonable does not just mean identifying with the "reason" side of the binary. The ability to discriminate between reason and political paranoia is *itself the rational act*. The capacity to differentiate "us" from "them" is a rational capacity, and its decentralized enactment makes it part of a political rationality. What we have here is a self-justifying performance, since proper turns are performed at the very moment the paranoid style is detected. Problematizing style is itself a style of problematization.

And what is this official style of the conspiracy panics? As noted earlier, this style involves a serious devotion to differentiation, in which false pretenders and excessive mimics can be distinguished from proper moderate reasoning. Pipes (1997) offers "tools . . . to identify conspiracy theories" that include "common sense, a knowledge of history, and the ability to recognize distinct patterns of conspiracism" (p. 38). It is crucial that he defines these as tools, rather than conceptually asserting them as expert truth-claims, as this sorting procedure is a "subjective process" (p. 37). What kind of subject are we talking about here? The goal is not a subject's obedience or agreement, but the willing and reasonable choice to embrace the noid style as one's own. Sorting out is a procedure—an invitation to take up a style of thought as a practice of the self on self, to adopt it as an ethos.

Producing a subject is not done once and for all. In an update of Lasswell for a more decentralized era, Pipes locates personality-type detection (and the social observatories) within the processes of subjectivation; that is, within the self. The paranoid style "manages to insinuate itself in the most alert and intelligent minds, so excluding it amounts to a *perpetual struggle*, one in which the reader is invited to join" (Pipes, p. 49, italics added). Like the incessant need to distinguish and expel the simulation, the sorting mechanism needs persistent renewal. The political subject needs continuous modification; prevention never ends. Pipes is essentially encouraging, through himself as example, a liberal technology of subjectification, where permanent self-criticism is necessary for governing through freedom. It is one in which

subjects turn on themselves properly, with a modicum of rationality that will turn *against* liberal rationality's excesses.

The conspiracy panic experts problematize conspiracism, but in order for subjects (as citizens) to perpetually perform their own problematizations. Thus, these training manuals present a new set of questions for consent. These manuals for thought prescribe an object to be problematized, but what makes *this* particular turning appealing, as opposed to other kinds (even paranoid ones)? In other words, what makes these positive mechanisms of ethical formation stick? Can the authority of these problematizations and prescriptions be "consented" to? Perhaps consent, rather than being a deliberative rational submission, can be defined as an "attachment," an affirmation of a technology of subjectification (Butler, 1997, p. 102).¹⁰

Consent, on the one hand, to the parameters of dissent, to the distribution of proper political positions and forms (moderation). Consent, as well, to the regime of truth that underpins this distribution. Consent, finally, to the particular technologies of subjectification which, in their incessant turning upon the self to differentiate and upon others to monitor, produce those parameters and rejuvenate that regime. To put it another way, the goal of scapegoating the paranoid is consent to the very ritual of scapegoating.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has worked through a number of texts to examine how the problematization of conspiracy theories is linked to conceptions of politics and reason. These texts are a series of meditations that link political forces to styles of thought. In these conspiracy panic works, we can see an intertwining of two themes or problems: first, a pathological style of thought (outside the boundaries of the regime of truth), and second, an extremism in political activity (beyond the pale of normal political discourse).

Through a transposition of a clinical term to the field of politics, "paranoia" and "extremism" are conceptually fused into new intelligible objects: the paranoid style, political paranoia, and conspiracism. Once this object is given comprehensibility, pronouncements are made upon the possible effects of this phenomenon and remedies are prescribed.

Through the work of experts, a style of thought is made visible, intelligible, and amenable to intervention as a means of moderating dissent and securing consent in contemporary liberalism. And what is peculiar to this relationship between liberal governance and thought is that the object of problematizations (conspiracism) is an exaggeration of liberalism's own ethos of skepticism and self-problematization.

The texts examined here are not the only experts involved in the conceptual production of political paranoia. These include academic researchers, "independent" scholars, journalists, citizen watchdog groups, public in-

tellectuals, and private intelligence-gathering organizations. Their technical expertise in the fields of political psychology, sociology, political science, intelligence, history, current affairs, and cultural analysis are not directly tied to the State, but they can still serve the interests of good government.

More than labeling, these problematizations are productive, as they construct objects and subjects for intervention, for thought, and for governing. Problematizations do not just exist as abstract objects or ideas. They are conceptual practices, “a kind of intellectual machinery or apparatus,” that makes the field of politics intelligible and “understandable” (Nikolas Rose, 1996, p. 42). Within liberal styles of governing, problematizations

have an epistemological character, in that they embody particular conceptions of the objects to be governed—nation, population, economy, society, community—and the subjects to be governed—citizens, subjects, individuals. And they deploy a certain style of reasoning: language here understood as itself a set of “intellectual techniques” for rendering reality thinkable and practicable, and constituting domains that are amenable—or not amenable—to reformatory intervention. (p. 42)

At times, this technical knowledge gets linked with State practices. Conspiracy panics provide the common sense upon which more concrete activities (especially state activities) can justify themselves. With the appearance of conspiracy theory experts in the news media and at congressional hearings, the conceptualization of conspiracism as a threat can lead to explicit state intervention into dissent (regulation of hate speech, increased surveillance, the State Department’s *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*).

The perpetual project of taking conspiracy theories as a “problem” has two tasks: a hermeneutics of differentiation that sort out the simulation of rationality from the authentic and the copy, and avoids the seduction of the simulation; and a hermeneutics of suspicion that targets and expels those styles of thought that cannot be co-opted and redeemed. Because the paranoid style can potentially be taken up by anyone it is critical to focus on the proximate: domestic paranoia. As Paul Virilio (1990) argues: “The reasons for alarm . . . are not important. What is essential here is that, by turning first suspicion, then hatred, onto one’s neighbor, one’s comrade, they destroy any trace of social solidarity” (p. 80). This “administration of fear” around conspiracism promotes a mistrust among people, encouraging amateur and professional political psychologists to monitor other citizens as way of reaffirming investment in a commonsensical people (p. 76).

The cohesion of liberalism’s political rationality comes with this injunction: to modulate thought and behavior with an eye toward limits and extremes. Responsible thought is an ethos as *modus*: a modulation through moderation, and vice versa.¹⁴ Within this will-to-moderate, dissent itself is problematized, and reasonable skepticism and rational critique are promoted.

Skepticism is moderately enacted, mistrust is itself mistrusted, and distinguishing the authentic American from the pretenders becomes a citizen's duty. These are the conceptual conditions established by conspiracy panic experts, ones that find expression in a number of institutional and discursive problematizations. The next two chapters examine one of those discourses, professional journalism, as it participates in conspiracy panics in the service of making politics reasonable again.