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Review of Conspiracy theory and American foreign policy, by Tim Aistrope

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Tim Aistrope's book, *Conspiracy theory and American foreign policy*, explores those alternative explanations of world politics that exist outside of and as a direct challenge to the foreign policy orthodoxy. Since the events of September 11th, 2001, these alternative explanations have been permanently plentiful, frequently persuasive and often surprisingly powerful. Indeed, the era began with heated and, at times, conspiratorial discussions about the causes and perpetrators of that infamous day's events. And such conspiracies endured, fueled by repeated intelligence revelations – via Snowden, Manning and WikiLeaks – detailing the secrets and excesses of America's response. Conspiracy theory, then, has been an ever-present feature of the post-9/11 era. However, during this book's writing and research, perhaps even the author would have been shocked at just how influential alternative explanations would soon become in world politics. From a 'post-truth' Brexit campaign in the UK, premised upon rejecting the advice of experts and instead voting with your gut, to the alarming proximity of a Republican candidate peddling 'alternative explanations' to the epicenter of global hegemony, such alternatives no longer appear to be so 'alternative' after all. Their labelling as conspiracy or paranoia, therefore, warrants exploration. And their rejection from the pages of serious scholarly work on the basis of such labelling can clearly no longer be maintained. Aistrope's book correspondingly takes seriously the role of conspiracy theories, providing a rigorous analysis of their rise, role and significance in a manner that complements a wide body of extant scholarship concerned with the role of discourse, culture and identity in the foreign policy process. It is an excellent scholarly work and deserves to read alongside books such as Richard Jackson's *Writing the War on Terrorism* and Stuart Croft's *Culture, Crisis and America's war on terror.*

Conspiracy theory and American foreign policy takes as its principal focus, what Aistrope terms, the 'Muslim paranoia narrative'. As much as the development or bases of such a narrative itself, Aistrope's concern is to reveal how it is that *US* discourses have created a particular social reality in which Muslim and Arab anti-Americanism is *seen to be* driven and sustained by conspiracy theories. These *American* discourses construct a particular and contingent image of the Middle East and North Africa, in which political opposition, outrage, anger, and even terrorism can be attributed to the inaccuracies and fallacies that underpin and give life to a paranoid – and conspiratorial – narrative. Aistrope shows that this is a particularly widespread and influential foreign policy discourse, shared and promulgated by US politicians, practitioners and policy makers, as well as the media. This discourse serves a number of important political functions. For example, it sustains an image of the United States as innocent and benevolent, while, at the same time, dismissing the potentially genuine bases for anti-American sentiment. It also helps to create a particular explanation of terrorism and insurgency, which, based as it is in the cultural proclivity to conspiracy, risks creating a region- or religion-wide suspect community, with far-reaching policy ramifications. For me, this argument has two related and complementary intellectual heritages. The first is a broad poststructural / critical constructivist / discourse analytic tradition, which has shown how reality – and, in particular, identity – is constructed in the words of political actors. The second is the work of Edward Said and that which it has subsequently inspired (such as Derek Gregory's *The Colonial Present*), focused on

Orientalism. Both, of course, possess mutual intellectual roots in the ideas of Foucault, despite the latter's more explicit anti-colonial normative critique and greater focus on the role played by ideas of the foreign abroad, rather than the domestic Other.

In its later stages, the book delves into the internal efforts of the US State Department to counter misinformation that might, for example, help to radicalize vulnerable young people and encourage them to join ISIL's ranks. The significant challenge for the counter-misinformation efforts of the United States, through strategies of deterrence and frames of containment, is that the US is itself so vulnerable to immanent critique. As Aistrope notes, the attempt to link Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, was seen – quite understandably – by very many people, to be the ultimate example of a racist conspiracy theory. The linking of Saddam to a terrorist underworld, as the premise for a regionally-destabilizing military intervention in 2003, stands out as one of the twenty-first century's most blatant and far-reaching fabrications: a foreign policy of illegal war premised upon a radical – and false – conspiracy theory. Likewise, a nation that has rolled out – in secret – the largest domestic and foreign spying apparatus in history will struggle to launch a campaign of shining a light on other people's murky conspiracies. And, yet, such efforts are logical politics. Aistrope highlights the delegitimizing role played by American efforts to label Arab and Muslim 'frustrations' as premised upon conspiracy. Such narratives, within a broader war of ideas, serve to dismiss the arguments of people who feel ill-treated or simply forgotten in the US-led liberal hegemonic project. Grievances that might be justified are rendered as misplaced and unfounded gripes resting on a foundation of lies and misunderstandings. The message becomes: if only they would listen and learn, they might see how good we are. And, in this, it becomes apparent how little ground has been travelled since the Bush administration first began to craft a response to 9/11 based on winning hearts and minds, or, perhaps more controversially still, since the colonial events that inspired Edward Said's labelling of western Orientalism. To be blunt, such enterprises suggest that Arabs and Muslims are too stupid or too biased to hear the truth, with little regard for the ironies of the United States pushing hard for 'the truth' in a post-Iraq world. Both the 'conspiracy theory' and efforts at its rectification are problematic and political. And in this battle of ideas, we see the unfolding of one of the modern world's most contentious relationships in the form of contemporary US foreign policy towards the Middle East.

This, then, is an important and rigorous book on an often all-too-easily dismissed topic. Conspiracy theory is no longer – if it ever was – the exclusive domain of the political fringe. US politics in the last few months has shown just how central conspiracy and paranoia are to the mainstream of contemporary political life. Sadly, during his campaign, Donald Trump has successfully diverted the attention of the world's media and repeatedly sucked the oxygen out of various political arenas, including academic forums. This is despite his proclivity for, what would politely be termed, fiction. Amongst near innumerable others, three points suffice to highlight the myriad importance of conspiracy theory in contemporary America. First, the coverage that followed Trump's recent public statement admitting that President Obama was indeed born in the United States demonstrates the extent to which conspiracy theory is intimately intertwined with political narratives and political power at the heart of American public life. Second, the resonance of such a move will have played out both positively and negatively, with many voters pleased at the removal of Trump's 'Birther' crown and others dismayed at his surrender of the fight. Like

candidates, narratives – conspiratorial and otherwise – find avid affectively invested opponents and proponents. As Trump and Brexit have shown, narratives built on *logos* can falter when facing *ethos* and *pathos*; in such situations, the question of accuracy appears to diminish in relevancy. Third, the act of labeling is political. It is hard to disagree with Aistrope's note that you know conspiracy when you see it. And, yet, I am delegitimizing 'Birtherism' through my labeling of it as a conspiracy theory, despite acknowledging that any analytical attempt to disaggregate the paranoid and the conspiratorial from the factual and the actual appears doomed to failure. This, then, is a significant challenge for public political life and for the discipline of Politics and International Relations. Aistrope has begun an important process of taking conspiracy theory seriously and showing how a paranoid style can play out with significant political and policy implications. In taking these seriously, however, in lieu of a mechanism for their identification as 'beyond truth', do we risk their elevation and validation as equally plausible bases on which to govern? Perhaps. But that, I suggest, is a challenge Politics and IR must rise to, especially in its critical, constructivist, poststructural and discourse analytic variants. Conspiracy is too important to dismiss even if it is often too damaging to legitimise.

My provocations for the symposium, therefore, are threefold: (i) What are the implications of Aistrope's argument for the study of foreign policy discourse specifically and the discipline of IR generally? Must conspiracy theory be studied in the same manner and with the same seriousness as 'mainstream thought'? And, given its interweaving with the politics of apparently non- or anti-conspiratorial response, is conspiracy theory just another part of the daily grind of narrative politics within a broader battle of ideas? (ii) On what grounds can we continue to label conspiracy and paranoia as such in the context of contemporary politics? Are such distinctions possible and desirable? And (iii) does our consideration of conspiracy and paranoia risk contributing to their legitimisation, potentially helping to elevate them to a position alongside mainstream ideas and limiting our ability to resist fabrication, whether blatant or subtle? Given the challenges of Trump and Brexit, these are important questions.