

## **“Conspiracy” and “Conspiracy Theory” – A Relationship of Inverse Proportions?**

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Paper to be delivered at Conspiracy Theory Conference, March 12-14 2015, Miami, FL

*(N.B. As will quickly become apparent to the reader, this is very much a work-in-progress. More complete and refined results from our research will be presented at the conference. Please do not cite or circulate)*

### **I. Abstract**

*The contemporary literature about conspiracy theories usually characterises the present as awash with talk of conspiracy, and as an age of paranoia. But is this really the case? Maybe we are conflating conspiracy theorising and talk about conspiracy theories, confusing the object of study with the study of the object? Drawing on data from the UK Hansard of Parliamentary debates, we explore whether conspiracy theorising is on the rise, stable or in decline.*

### **II. Introduction**

For a number of years the research into conspiracy theories has been developing momentum. Regardless of the particular perspectives and the degree to which these perspectives might be complementary or antagonistic, a growing group of political scientists, cultural theorists, literary scholars, psychologists, sociologists and historians concur on one point, namely on the importance of conspiracy theories as a social phenomenon and on the worthiness of this phenomenon as an object of academic study. This has given rise to a temptation to posit some kind of correlation linking academic interest in conspiracy theories and current levels of conspiracy theorizing. Indeed, in much of the literature one finds alarmist statements about an age of paranoia in which in the ‘pond of society’ there has been an ‘algal bloom’ of conspiracy theories has occurred. Certainly much of the research literature, eager to tout the responsiveness of the social sciences to the problems of the day and to, more directly, attract attention to the urgency of its own line of investigation, has been given to evoking such a malaise afflicting large portions of the population who interpret the world they inhabit in terms of sinister motives and devious designs. (See, as only one example, for a renewed assertion of this rise in conspiracy theories, Barkun, 206-218)

The responsiveness of the social sciences is, however, not linked to the phenomena it responds to on the basis of any simple quantitative correlation; it is not the case that when there is more of something the social sciences re-direct their resources to the study of this particular something. Instead in determining the direction of its inquiry, the social sciences are buoyed along on quite different currents. In some of the recent research there has been a recognition that conspiracy theories as a phenomena are in decline. This realization is not only heartening because it counters the tone of cultural pessimism which often informs writing on conspiracy theories. It also indicates that we are approaching a more objective assessment of the phenomenon in question; the object of study is no longer being confused with the study of the object.

Thus, using the letters sent by readers of the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* to the newspaper editors, our conference organizers Joe Uscinski and Joe Parent identified the 1890s and the 1950s as the two periods in which the level of conspiracy theorizing as reflected in this material peaked. Yet in passing they also note that since the 1960s the presence of conspiracy theories has decreased: “From 1964 on, conspiracy theories average half a percent of the letters per year, while before 1964 conspiracy theories are more than double. The data suggest one telling fact: we do not live in an age of conspiracy theories and have not for some time.” (Uscinski and Parent, 110-111) Admittedly, what impressed the “Joes” (if we may) in the data is the relatively stable presence

conspiracy theories maintain in American public discourse. Their efforts focused on explaining this stability in terms of the cognitive constants created by a two-party political system. Indeed, they characterized their model as “hydraulic; conspiracy theories are a liquid that, when displaced, soon find their level again.” (Uscinski and Parent, 109) Such a model is ill-equipped in dealing with their secondary finding of a decline in conspiracy theories since the 1960s.

In view of this, we can turn to Michael Butter’s recent work *Plots, Designs and Schemes. American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present* (2014), which also claims that conspiracy theories have been in decline of late. Butter’s inquiry into the history of American conspiracy theories is framed by a broader historical sweep; he begins his story with the 17th century Puritans. This backdrop allows him to put into perspective anxieties about current levels of conspiracy theories – a glance back at the nineteenth century provides a revealing insight into the all-pervasive presence conspiracy theories then had. According to Butter, the retreat of conspiracy theories from the mid-twentieth century onwards corresponds to their social marginalization, becoming an unacceptable form of explanation for historical and social phenomena.

Butter’s substantive investigation ends with the Red Scare of the 1950s but in concluding he remarks astutely that the alleged subsequent retreat of conspiracy theories resembles that of issues such as racism, homophobia, sexism and xenophobia (Butter, 290). A casual survey of popular media outlets indicates that society today is extremely sensitive about, for example, racism; public figures whose remarks are deemed racist attract immediate and vociferous censure. This heightened sensitivity to racism does not, however, indicate a more racist society. In a parallel manner, a society in which there is more talk of conspiracy theories does not equate to a society more enthralled to conspiracy theories but rather to one which is more sensitive to them.

Butter’s study thus converges with that of the Uscinski and Parent in diagnosing an attenuation of conspiracy theorizing in public discourse (at least in America; there are good reasons to posit a trend in the opposite direction for other, less liberal societies). And yet, neither study engages fully with this trend. Consequently, we have taken their findings as our cue to pursue the matter further.

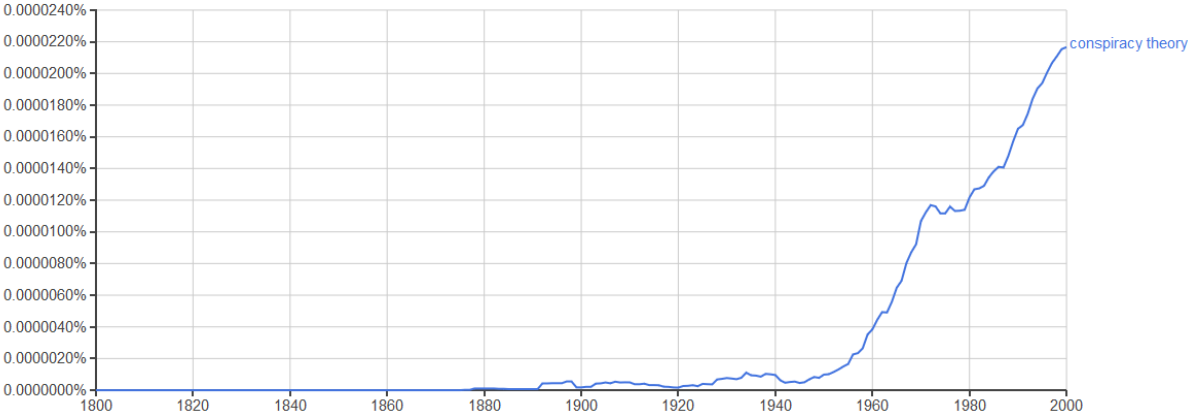
### **III. The Problem**

For a study which seeks to explain the general decline in conspiracy theories in western liberal societies a useful starting point might be the conspicuous parallel between the onset of the decline of conspiracy theorising on the one hand and the ascendancy of “conspiracy theory” (and its *ad hominem* derivative: “conspiracy theorist”) as a readily recognizable concept on the other hand. The pre-history of this concept extends back into the nineteenth-century, but it only entered the more general social and cultural vocabulary in the 1960s. With very few exceptions, conspiracy theory has always been used as a term of disqualification; it is deployed to delegitimize and marginalize somebody else’s view (Bratich 2008). This fact has been bemoaned by a number of academics who discern in the term a means to suppress valid scepticism towards and criticism of those in power (For examples, see Pigden 2007; Husting and Orr 2007; Coady 2012). Such arguments have even culminated in the contention that the label “conspiracy theory” was introduced as a covert effort by intelligence agencies to stifle the articulation of legitimate scepticism, in particular as it was directed towards the official explanation of the JFK assassination (DeHaven-Smith 2013)

Our paper does not represent an intervention in this debate about the qualifications of “conspiracy theory” as a term of neutral academic discourse given that its use elsewhere effects a disqualification of certain views. For the time being we simply note that a perusal of the historical materials suggests on occasions that it might be useful to have a term with which to flag down some of the excesses associated with conspiracy theorizing. Our primary interest is rather to measure the impact which the term ‘conspiracy theory’ has on the willingness within society to make accusations of conspiracy

and more generally invoke the term 'conspiracy.' Our working hypothesis is that one might find a decline in the latter which correlates to the rise in the use of the former.

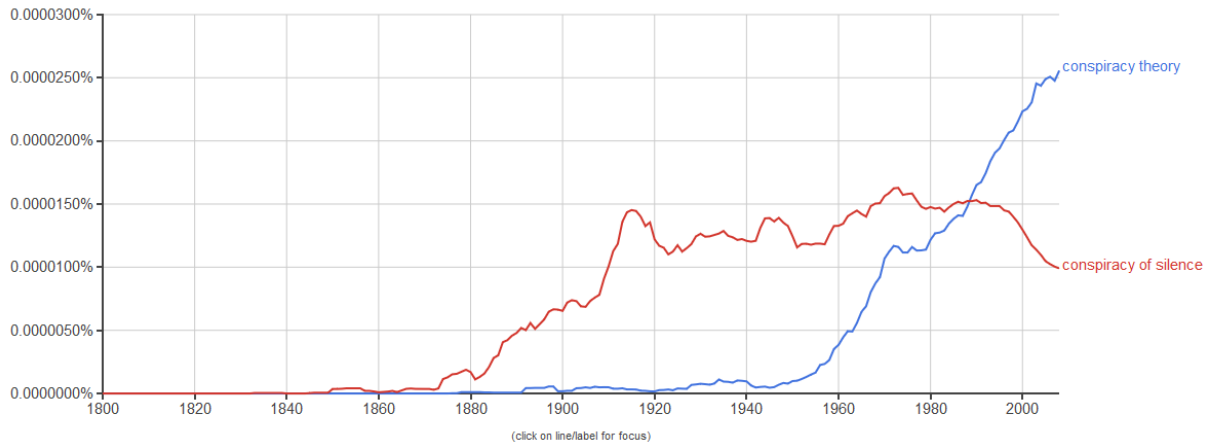
As a preliminary test for the plausibility of this test, we can begin with the ngram for 'conspiracy theory' (henceforth to be shortened to CT), which is most likely familiar to many conference participants. As one can see use of CT has been steadily rising since the 1950s.



Interestingly use of the term 'conspiracy' (henceforth to be shortened to C) has been on the decline (if the ngram is to be trusted), though of course no one would wish to adduce from this a reduction in the prevalence of conspiracies in society:



The disparity of scales is too great for there to be any real value in mapping onto the same graph the increase in CT and the decrease in C. It is therefore worthwhile considering a phrase more commensurate with the frequency in usage of CT and yet employing C. As is shown below the phrase "conspiracy of silence" lends itself to this purpose. The phrase is, of course, interesting in its own right. If conspiracy is derived from the Latin verb *spirare*, meaning 'to whisper,' then one might think of the 'conspiracy of silence' as the limiting case which is reached when the whispering becomes so hushed that it effectively disappears, leaving nothing behind in silence. But can a conspiracy really be organized without any communication? There are good reasons to argue that we have here a metaphorical usage of the term. It in any case serves well as a point of comparison to CT. Below is the ngram for both phrases:



Thus one sees that at some point just before 1990, the lines met, indicating (according to ngram) that at that point the frequency of usage for CT and for ‘conspiracy of silence’ was equal. Since then CT has continued to rise while ‘conspiracy of silence’ has been in decline. Of course, because of its metaphorical quality someone who speaks of a ‘conspiracy of silence’ would most probably not qualify as a ‘conspiracy theorist.’ Yet – so our somewhat speculative causal assumption - the first phrase has lost appeal because invoking the notion of conspiracy now anticipates stigmatization.

Why is that so? Our working hypothesis posits an inverse relationship where the frequency in usage of ‘conspiracy of silence’ is the dependent variable, its decline been driven by the rise in CT. More particularly, the pejorative profile of the term CT has, we claim, impacted upon other phrases, meaning that there is now a greater reluctance to use the term ‘conspiracy of silence’; our working hypothesis claims that people today, in wishing to make a plausible argument, will be less inclined to use the term ‘conspiracy’ or any phrase containing it. The tendency to stigmatize such usage is correlated to the rise of the term CT, indicating a greater scepticism about claims of conspiracy.

#### IV. Our Source Material: Parliamentary Debates

Much time was expended in the search for historical material which, akin to the letter of the editors used by the Joes, would allow us to quantitatively test this hypothesis. Only recently was it decided that the UK *Hansard*, comprising the parliamentary debates carried out in the House of Commons and the House of Lords, might answer our needs in this regard. The debates extending back to 1803 for the House of Commons have recently been digitized and are easily searchable; we are thus undertaking a form of historical research which until relatively recently would have been unthinkable simply because it would have been too labour-intensive. Furthermore the combative, and indeed confrontational nature of debate in these chambers creates a discourse where accusations of C (or subterfuge of another kind) and rebuttals of such accusations, often employing the term CT, occur particularly frequently. Although the level of usage of C and CT might therefore not be representative of general social communication, our interest is focussed, on the relative use of these two terms.

The first time that the term CT was heard in the British Parliament was, according to the *Hansard*, at approximately 7:55 pm on 23 November 1965 when Lord Chalfont addressed the House of Lords in a debate about the re-organization of the reserve army: “My Lords, one or two noble Lords opposite seem, from things which have been said this afternoon, to be addicted to the conspiracy theory of Government and history.”<sup>1</sup> This use of the term CT, coupled to ‘government’ or ‘history’ or ‘society’ is actually fairly typical of the time. We have extended our time frame back to 1920, and collected the texts from two separate databases, the first covering the period 1803-March 2005, the second for

<sup>1</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1965/nov/23/reorganisation-of-the-reserve-army-1>

the period 1980-2015 (from which we took data from April 2005 until the present).<sup>2</sup> This search yielded a set comprising 7,019 pieces of data.

That is as far as the purely mechanical search takes us. It soon becomes obvious that content analysis was then necessary to determine the exact nature of the usage. To simply provide one salient example for why such content analysis is necessary, one can consider the statement “I am not a conspiracy theorist but ...” Normally CT (or one of its derivatives such as ‘conspiracy theorist’) is used to describe the views of someone else – and indeed in a manner which derides and delegitimizes their claim. In the case of someone making a statement such as the one above, the derision is anticipated and explicitly thematised in the hope that this might neutralize it. Following the “but” then usually comes an account of events which might warrant description as a conspiracy theory. Use of CT here does not indicate a person averse to CTs but rather cognizant of how they can attract social censure.

## V. Content Analysis

Other complicating factors abound, and at present we are far from having solved them all. One particularly problematic feature is the use of C in a legal sense. Obviously when a number of alleged perpetrators have planned and committed a crime, they might face charges not only pertaining the execution of the crime, but also of ‘conspiring’ to commit it. This creates difficulties for us since conspiring to commit arson, for example, does not necessarily correspond to a description of a situation which might then be deemed a CT and, as a description, rebutted on such grounds. On the other hand it might – an a priori determination cannot be made in such a case. Furthermore, conspiring to spread sedition might be brought as a charge against a group engaging in activities, a description of which might very well correspond to what some would then call a CT. The set of legal usage of C and the set of usage of C which could conceivably provoke the response of CT overlap. So far, we have decided to register and then exclude all usage of this legal technical variety – and this usage is relatively frequent as politicians frequently discuss and debate criminal cases and also discuss and debate the laws and legislations which might be applied in such cases. Our data suggests roughly one third of all usage is technical or legal, and thus redundant to our primary purpose.

There is also metaphorical usage of the term C which we have tried to isolate. As mentioned above, ‘conspiracy of silence’ falls into this category. Another obvious example can be found when certain entities are said to conspire even though these entities do not possess any agency. Such is the case, for example, in the phrase: “circumstances have conspired to ...” Yet even here it is sometimes difficult to make exact distinctions. When Lieut.-Colonel Morre-Brabazon asserted on 5 July 1922 that “All education in this country is really a conspiracy to delay the sexual growth of the boy,” one has to ask whether this is metaphorical usage or usage which would conceivably later attract the censure implicit in the term CT; Lieut.-Colonel Morre-Brabazon’s statement might sound a little off the wall, but then that is also true of many genuine CTs.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in a parliamentary context usage may be humorous, floral, or deliberately provocative. As an example of the former, a recent discussion about the virtues of volunteering abroad included one member recounting his experience in the Philippines: ‘I concur that the living conditions were austere. I think that I had electricity-at least, I could see what I was doing-but there was no hot water. I ended up having to dangle some contraption in water. Initially, I thought it was a conspiracy to get me to electrocute myself, but I survived that prospect’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com> and <http://www.publications.parliament.uk>

<sup>3</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1922/jul/05/criminal-law-amendment-bill>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm101124/halltext/101124h0001.htm>

Finally we have tried to isolate neutral usage of the term which might occur with regard to historical events. Talk, for example, of the Lahore Conspiracy Case trial of 1915 qualifies as terminology which is undisputed by all, regardless of what their particular views might be on the historical episode and regardless of what their general views are on the role conspiracies play in society.

According to our preliminary investigations, this will still leave us with a rich data field. At the moment we are in the process of refining the categories which we will use to systematically evaluate this data. After our initial immersion in the material we are developing thematic categories which will demonstrate how particular issues generated usage of C. One finds, for example, frequent references to parliamentary conspiracies, involving charges of covert collusion between parties or front-benchers and back-benchers, etc. References to the problems of Empire abound, and, as might be expected, nationalist independence movements often generated fears of C within the British Parliament. This was as true of India as it was of Ireland.<sup>5</sup> The struggle of labour against capital also stimulates suspicions of C, particularly because it is linked to the wider international cause of communism.

From the 1960's onward, an allegation of C can be answered and denigrated by the claim that the allegation amounts to a CT. Yet even before this term was to be found in the debunker's arsenal, other rhetorical means were available to rebut the charge of C; our research will hopefully yield some insight into the scepticism towards charges of C before this scepticism could be neatly conveyed by the term CT. Thus, on 23 July 1941 in a debate about the Emergency Powers Act, Mr. Maxton ridiculed the suggestions of a "great arms conspiracy [...] throughout Scotland [in which] the heather is going to be alight, the fiery cross, the tartans and the bagpipes out, and goodness knows what."<sup>6</sup> (This occurred without any explicit previous usage of the term C which might have prompted him to use the term in his turn in this mocking form.)

More generally, the debates are often associated with critical junctures in twentieth-century British history. This question about the relative usage of C and CT, as specific as it might be, affords an exciting opportunity to survey this history from an unusual angle. By asking which themes had a relatively high or low tendency to generate talk of conspiracies, which themes then were divisive because this talk provoked 'push-back,' and then how, if it did indeed exist, this 'push-back' was orchestrated (particularly in those cases where CT was not yet available as a term), we hope to throw a new light on some otherwise well-known episodes of modern British history.

With regard to the content analysis conducted thus far, we feel most confident in drawing a distinction between differentiating between a naïve and complex usage of C. A naïve usage of C invokes in a highly unabashed manner the charge of C. Some examples might help to convey the idea. On 13 March 1930 one hears in a sitting of the House of Commons "I repeat that there has been this deliberate conspiracy on the part of certain interests to discredit the Government."<sup>7</sup> Or on the 7 April 1948 one could have heard in the same chambers the following statement: "it is perfectly correct to say that there was a conspiracy in the Press."<sup>8</sup>

Our intuition is that such uninhibited usage of the charge of C would today have to anticipate a response invoking the label CT and that another vocabulary would be employed in making this claim,

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<sup>5</sup> Kenya also is discussed as being a hot-bed of conspiracy and insurrection.

<sup>6</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1941/jul/23/emergency-powers-defence-act-1939>

<sup>7</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1930/mar/13/unemployment-industrial-and-fiscal-policy>

<sup>8</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1948/apr/07/budget-proposals-and-economic-survey>

or – for better or worse – the claim might not be made at all. In either case there will be decline in the naïve usage of C and a corresponding rise in what we call the complex usage of C.

The category ‘complex’ includes two main types of statement: on the one hand, ‘conspiracy’ is often used as part of an attack against an opponent. In such instances, ‘theory’ may be implied but need not be used. The second type of statement includes some sort of caveat. The most obvious caveat is the negative, when a speaker denies a conspiracy has taken place, or taking part in one. Thus in 1954, Sydney Silverman of Nelson and Colne opined that he, ‘a humble Member of this House, would refuse to take part in any conspiracy to deceive the public...’<sup>9</sup> The speaker may be using a hypothetical or counterfactual, e.g. saying something like ‘If I were a conspiracy theorist, I would ...’. In other cases, a speaker may use an adjective to hedge the claim being made, e.g. by inserting ‘almost’ or ‘unspoken’ in front of the word conspiracy.

CT is in almost all cases a specific example of complex usage of C, but it is not the only one. As in our earlier Scottish example, it is still possible to use sarcastic hyperbole to dismiss claims of conspiracy. As one final example, we point to the interesting case in which the conservative MP for Northampton, Antony Marlow, asked then conservative Secretary of State for Social Services Patrick Jenkin in a debate on 29 April 1980 about the belief that there was a “long-term conspiracy to prevent the people of this country knowing the size of the immigrant population among us at the moment.”<sup>10</sup> Marlow seemed to share this belief; he certainly does not distance himself from it. Jenkin responded: “My hon. Friend would not expect me to endorse the conspiracy theory.” We have here a relatively rare example in which usage of C provides the prompt for a use of CT. It marks a moment where the naïve unabashed usage of C could still be indulged by someone who had not yet become fully alert to its potential for drawing fire in the form of a complex usage of C and indeed an explicit usage of CT. (Admittedly the fire Marlow draws in this case is rather reserved (they were after all both conservatives), and one can even ask whether CT carries any wider generic meaning for Jenkin.) Later CT is most often applied to cases where C has not been explicitly invoked; opponents whose thinking might bear the traits of conspiracy theorizing are today more guarded and rarely so generous as to provide the open flank which a naïve usage of C creates.

## VI. Tentative findings

Our content analysis was flawed in many ways: firstly, we were in no position to pay droves of undergraduates to code the documents for us. Secondly, we found our coding scheme to be open to ambiguity, and consequently inter-coder reliability measures, as calculated using Krippendorff’s alpha, were too low to be trusted. The aggregated results, though, dividing the texts into technical or legal, naïve, and complex usage were sufficiently robust to be used at this exploratory stage.<sup>11</sup> This distinction is productive, as it gives a measure of the degree to which parliamentarians perceive the term ‘conspiracy’ as problematic. Because of these flaws, and the fact that we intend to redo the coding completely with a new schema, the findings below should be considered as tentative and yet to be fully substantiated. We present them here to illustrate possible useful avenues of inquiry.

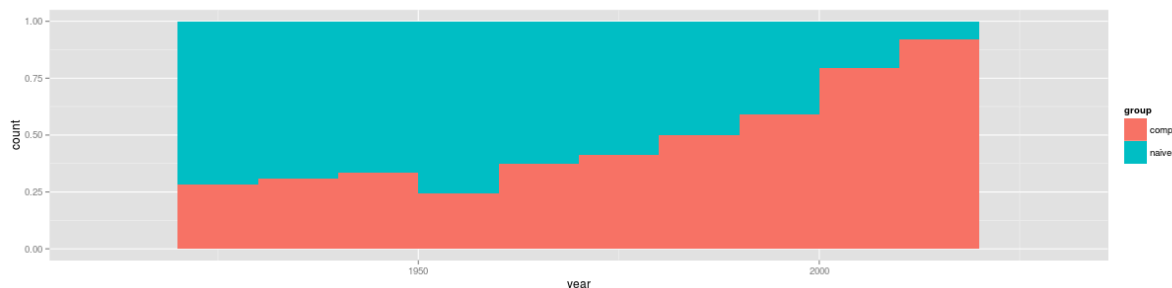
We find that naïve usage has become almost impossible. Such instances as persist are more likely due to ambiguities in the coding scheme than straight-forward allegations of conspiracy.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1954/nov/10/clause-3-short-title>

<sup>10</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1980/apr/29/census-order-1980>

<sup>11</sup> Krippendorff-alpha of 0.846. Findings are reported based on a sample of 1,100 coded statements



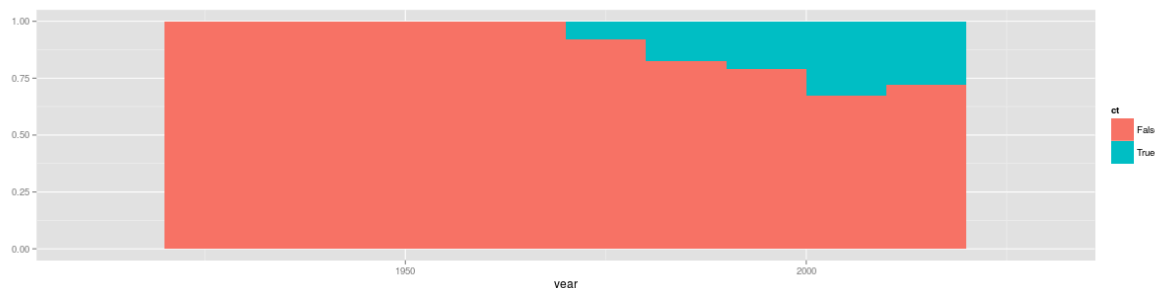
**Figure 1: Density of naive (blue) to complex usage (red)**

Consider the following example from 2008 which refers to post-office closures:

*In the midlands, there are 160 proposed closures, and only four decisions have been reversed. I am concerned that there is some sort of conspiracy.<sup>12</sup>*

This example is among the least ambiguous which we could find (though it might be argued that the caveat ‘some sort’ tempers the claim that a conspiracy has taken place). To take account of the ambiguity we probably need a tighter coding scheme yet the main point is that even such ambiguous statements have become exceedingly rare.

Within the group of ‘complex’ usage, the vast majority of instances see ‘conspiracy’ used to ridicule an opponent and to undermine their claims. Despite this, actual use of the phrase ‘conspiracy theory’ is rare:



**Figure 2: proportion of non-technical statements that use the term ‘conspiracy theory’ (blue)**

While at present roughly one quarter of statements mentioning C also mention CT, the proportion using C in an effort to discredit an opponent is much larger, at roughly three quarters. Frequently ‘theory’ is left implicit. If the numbers identified here are accurate and hold for a wider, more general corpora, then there is every reason to think that the ngram plot for ‘conspiracy’ is to a significant degree being propped up by CT often being implied when discussing C.

Returning to the Hansard, consider the statements below, selected to illustrate how ‘conspiracy’ can be used to ridicule an opponent, without recourse to CT:

*The hon. Gentleman seems to be taking a rather “conspiratorial” view of these developments in Welsh politics. Does he think that the referendum, too, was a conspiracy?<sup>13</sup>*

*The regime's explanation for the events of 30 May defies belief. Its claim that there was some sort of communist conspiracy to overthrow the military dictatorship really does beggar belief.<sup>14</sup>*

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080722/debtext/80722-0014.htm>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm111103/debtext/111103-0002.htm>

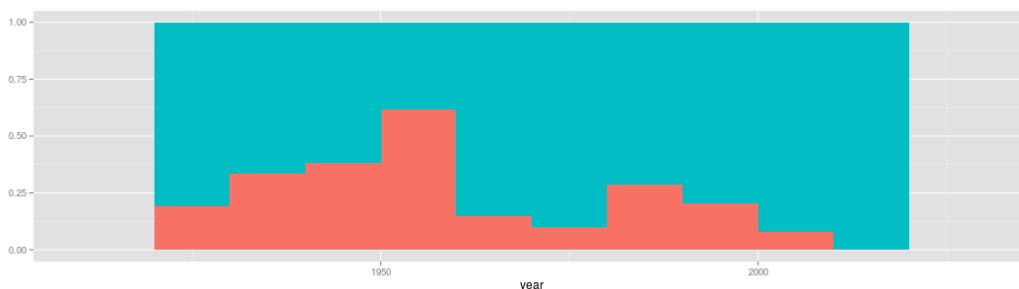


*As to the causes of the crisis, we have heard little to-day, from the Front Bench at all events, about a bankers' conspiracy—some nefarious, sinister, secret, international conspiracy to overthrow the Labour Government in England. We all from time to time have letters from correspondents who are convinced that they are the victims of some malign semi-criminal conspiracy which is affecting their welfare and their health. It is called persecution mania. We have had something of the same kind in some of the speeches and articles of the last few weeks.*<sup>15</sup>

*What I did hear of the hon. and gallant Member's speech convinced me that I have interpreted him rightly. It is absurd to suggest that there is any kind of conspiracy on the part of these people who are importing goods that the people of this country want to buy.*<sup>16</sup>

These statements do not only invoke conspiracy as part of an attack on an opponent, they also illustrate how such usage is nothing new: printed in reverse chronological order, they are from 2011, 2003, 1931 and 1928 respectively. The example from 1931, in which then Home Secretary Sir Henry Samuel mocks those who talk about ‘a bankers’ conspiracy—some nefarious, sinister, secret, international conspiracy to overthrow the Labour Government in England’ would not have been out of place following the recent financial crisis. One expects, though, that if the term had been available he might have branded his adversaries ‘conspiracy theorists,’ though this would undoubtedly have resulted in less colourful prose.

This brings us to our final contention: the term ‘conspiracy’ has been used to debunk opponents for a long time. Such usage is nothing new and therefore there is little to be said for the contention that CT was invented as a means to discredit allegations of C; such discreditation was being undertaken with C alone long before CT entered the general vocabulary. Consider the plot below: it shows the density of statements where a parliamentarian has reacted to a statement or position implying a conspiracy had taken place. The area in blue corresponds to the proportion of these statements where ‘conspiracy’ is used pejoratively, in an attack:



**Figure 3: proportion of debunking (blue) when reacting to a statement implying conspiracy**

Apart from the immediate post-war period, in the 1950s, C has tended to be used as to ridicule opponents. This is almost universally the case at the moment, though even in the 1920s-50s this was common. The only real exception is the 1950s in which the term was popularised and made part of mainstream political debate, which at this time resonated with references to ‘Communist conspiracies’, ‘Tory conspiracies’, and ‘Trade Union conspiracies’.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmhansrd/vo040225/halltext/40225h01.htm>

<sup>15</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1931/sep/08/financial-situation>

<sup>16</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1928/may/24/state-of-trade>

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