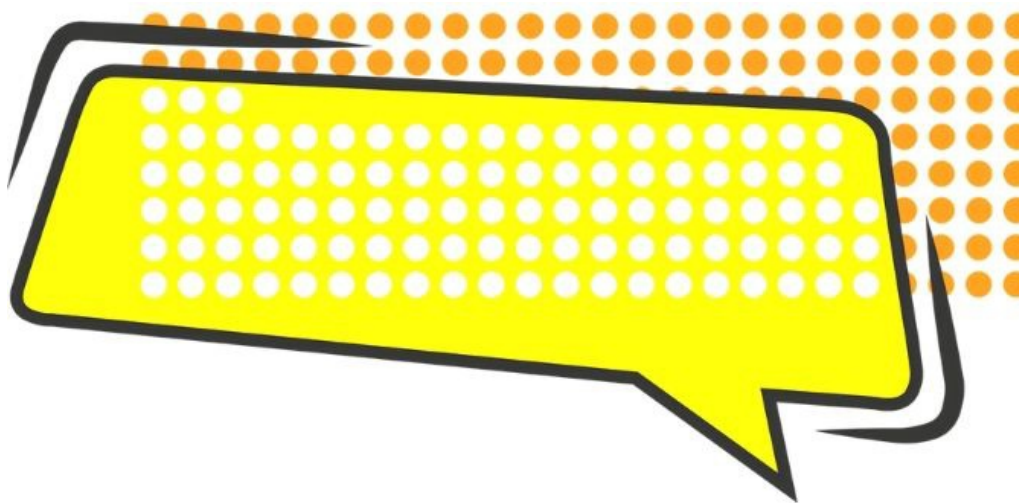


# Book Review | A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy by Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum

*In A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy, Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum identify and outline the emergence of a new type of conspiracist thinking in our contemporary moment, showing it to pose a fundamental threat to democratic functioning. While questioning whether the book ascribes too much intentionality to those engaging in ‘the new conspiracism’, this is nonetheless a timely and important conceptualisation, writes Ignas Kalpokas.*



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***A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy.* Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum. Princeton University Press. 2019.**

During the past few years at least, there has been a growing discourse on the ‘end’ or ‘crisis’ of democracy. Not least among the concerns leading to such dire insights is the emergence of conspiratorial, fake news or post-truth campaigning as a mainstream political tool. Obviously, lies, appeals to something other than fact and truth, as well as conspiracy theories, have been around before the present moment. Hence, it is the task for academics and commentators postulating such seismic shifts to demonstrate where and in what ways the change has taken place. That is precisely what Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum aim to do in their new book, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, through conceptualising what they call the ‘new conspiracism’.



The new conspiracism for the authors is precisely what it says on the tin: a new type of conspiracist thinking, distinguishable through its lack of sense. Effectively, if traditional conspiracism relies on conspiracy theories, then new conspiracism is best defined as conspiracy *without* theory. The authors espouse the well-established view that traditional conspiracism provides a tool for dealing with shock, anxiety, insecurity and disbelief by providing order and certainty by way of allegedly uncovering hidden truths, world orders and nasty plots that can be blamed for something. At the same time, traditional conspiracism is inclusive and empowering in encouraging people to embark on detective work to uncover hidden things. Meanwhile, the currency of new conspiracism is, in the authors' opinion, exactly the opposite – disorientation without the search for 'truth'. Moreover, instead of careful searching for hidden 'facts' to substantiate the traditional conspiracy theory, new conspiracism operates on the basis of mere insinuation (as in the title phrase, 'A lot of people are saying...') or mere exclaimed assertions. In other words, while traditional conspiracism still embraces the rules of conventional epistemology (giving 'evidence', substantiating claims, etc), new conspiracism does away with mainstream rules altogether.

In the place of 'evidence', however dubious, Muirhead and Rosenblum trace a new source of new conspiracist authority – repetition. Essentially, if a claim is repeated, tweeted and shared numerous times, then it indeed becomes true that 'a lot of people are saying' something, and that fact alone becomes sufficient to sow doubt, if not to prove the point. In addition to setting a low bar for demonstrating veracity, new conspiracism is also convenient for the claim-maker as 'bare assertions, ominous questions, and innuendo' are elastic and can be pulled in every direction depending on the situation, while purporting to be merely asking questions 'evades ownership of the claim' (39). As a result of such vagueness and plasticity, new conspiracism is also revealed to have a relationship with the out-group that is very different from traditional forms. Moreover, while the followers of traditional conspiracy theories, encouraged by the alleged 'facts' they purport to have discovered, can afford a feeling of righteousness and the drive to correct others, new conspiracists tend to simply deny others' standing on an ad hominem basis while simultaneously distorting the very knowledge criteria that has underpinned our societies.

Whereas traditional conspiracism is seen primarily as a quest for explanations, the new conspiracism is presented as essentially a way to vent unarticulated emotions. As the authors claim: 'For angry minds it offers the immediate gratification of lashing out, of throwing verbal stones.' This, once again, relates to persuasion and the elaboration of claims: new conspiracism is attractive as a form of venting *precisely* because of the low bar of veracity, whereby 'if one cannot be certain that a belief is entirely false, with the emphasis on *entirely*, then it might be true – and that's true enough' (43). Hence, detailed disquisitions can be dealt away with completely and negative political emotions unleashed. Moreover, this perfect storm is also seen as being strongly related to the revolution in communications that has replaced gatekeeping with popularity, the latter again privileging quick emotion-laden exchanges.

There is, however, an important nasty underside of new conspiracism, at least as Muirhead and Rosenblum see it. By eroding trust not only in people but also in entire institutions and political systems, the new conspiracism is seen in the book as a threat to democracy itself. Politicians, institutions and expert bodies are framed by perpetrators of new conspiracism as simply unworthy of trust and obedience (or even too dangerous for that, as in [the Hillary Clinton paedophile ring claim](#)). Moreover, new conspiracism is anti-democratic in another important way: it is radically anti-pluralist. It posits a singular 'true' people against untrustworthy elites. However, the latter point seems to be more like a blend of traditional conspiracism and populism rather than a distinctly new conspiracist condition – something that the authors do not address. Still, partial support for that claim can perhaps be drawn from the authors' assertion that since political parties are among the institutional victims, public debate (inasmuch as it can still be called a debate) becomes premised on conflict and battle, but without the structured competition and legitimation of difference that traditional party competition provides.

Unfortunately, despite conceptual innovation, there are serious drawbacks to this book as well. Already in the Introduction, a much more debatable assertion begins to take shape: that there are some shadowy forces (which remain largely unidentified, except for Donald Trump and, more implicitly, some Republicans) *conspiring* to bring down democracy through undermining trust and promoting disorientation. However, the question that lingers throughout the book is whether the authors are not ascribing too much intentionality here. While it is clear that new conspiracism has the effect of undermining democracy, it remains far from certain as to whether there really is some intentional premeditated plot, as the authors imply, or whether political actors just aim to exploit for their own political benefit societal trends that develop independently and for completely unrelated reasons.

Without such a demonstration, the authors' claim remains mere assertion, paradoxically itself of a new conspiracist type: to paraphrase, 'a lot of people are saying that some shadowy forces conspire to bring down democracy'. And since most of the book is dedicated precisely to debunking the alleged conspiracy, the above fallacy becomes paramount. In fact, once the new conspiracist thesis is fully conceptualised midway through Chapter Two, the book turns into a seemingly infinite cycle of repetition of the conspiracy claim, often with the same examples given (usually drawn from the 2016 US Presidential campaign, the Trump presidency and school shootings), just with slightly different actors involved.

Overall, the book's contribution should be divided into two distinct aspects: the legitimate, timely and very important conceptualisation of new conspiracism and the much less supportable insinuation of a conscious antidemocratic plot. Moreover, it must be noted the book is completely US-focused and therefore may have a somewhat more limited appeal and relevance in other parts of the world where both the concerns and good knowledge of the examples given cannot be taken for granted. On a related note, and probably even more importantly, its academic input notwithstanding, the book has to be read in the light of the tribalism of current US politics, ultimately framing the academic argument into a Democrat-Republican debate. While Trump's and his allies' highly complicated relationship with truth makes them potent objects of critique, I was nonetheless left with the feeling that the elaboration of the academic argument was more of a side-effect than the central focus.

*This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on the [LSE Review of Books blog](#).*

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