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# The Value of Conspiracy Theory

*Ed White*

***The term conspirators was not, as has been alleged, rashly or inconsiderately adopted . . . the consideration of the nature and construction of the new constitution naturally suggests the epithet.***

*Centinel 12*

For several decades, many historians and cultural critics have lamented a primal pathology of American culture, “the tendency of political leaders and their followers to view the world in conspiratorial terms” (Curry and Brown vii). Coincident with this condemnation, of course, is denial of the validity of conspiracy theories—one recent study defines them as “fears of nonexistent conspiracies” (Pipes 1)—which are read, rather, as symptoms of broader cultural dynamics. But more is at stake here than the conspiratorial outlook itself: the methodological protocols of interpreting conspiracy theories explain much of the critical interest, such that one prominent historian of early America, Bernard Bailyn, interrupted his analysis of *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) with “A Note on Conspiracy.” At issue for critics of American conspiracy theory, then, is not simply the more reliable description of events or culture, but, more fundamentally, a saner understanding of that culture.

This essay attempts a methodological rehabilitation of conspiracy theories on the dual assumptions that the eighteenth century was rife with actual conspiracies and that conspiracy theories from that moment offer valuable insights. But as with the adversaries of conspiratorial consciousness, my concern will be primarily methodological. An explication of conspiracy theories, I argue, provides the contours for a necessary theoretical program uniting structural and cultural analysis. Accordingly the first part of this essay surveys the dominant historiographical critiques of conspiracy theory, highlighting important similarities between the “republican synthesis” school and poststructuralist literary

criticism. Then, in a discussion of an anti-Federalist theorist, I outline the *structural* insights of conspiracy thought. Next, in a discussion of the Newburgh Conspiracy and Madison's *Federalist* No. 10, I explore the value of conspiracy theory as *cultural* analysis. My focus throughout will be upon conspiracy theories of eighteenth-century America, in part because there remains a real need to historicize conspiracy thought. Accordingly, my essay concludes with a tentative historical explanation for the proliferation of conspiracy theory in early America.

### 1. . . . as Logic

The contemporary assault on conspiracy theories arguably begins with David Brion Davis's essay on "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature" (1960). Although not assessing conspiracy rhetoric in the early national period—his focus is on the mid-nineteenth century—Davis significantly framed his discussion of American nativism as an "ideological" as opposed to "sociological" approach,<sup>1</sup> outlining three recurrent features of countersubversive rhetoric. First, the imagined conspiracies expressed dominant values through a process of inversion. As the "precise antitheses" of Jacksonian democracy, imagined conspiracies simply confirmed and strengthened mainstream American ideals (208). Second, countersubversive discourse reaffirmed social cohesion. At a moment of anxiety over the "mobile, rootless, and individualistic society" of liberalism (208), conspiracy theories identified small, insular cultural collectives isolated from "the unifying and disciplining force of public opinion" (213). Attacks on these collectives then were "a means of promoting unity," giving stability to "the individual ego" (215). Third, conspiracy fantasies provided an outlet for the "projection of forbidden desires" and "irrational impulses" (217, 224). These were often sexual desires satisfied through detailed imagination and then moral rejection (221–24). Davis's conclusion thus located the real conspiratorial "activity" in the culture of the countersubversives—that is, in the cultural logic of early modernity.

Three years later, Richard Hofstadter gave his famous lecture, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."<sup>2</sup> Defining the conspiracy as "a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character" (14), Hofstadter stressed a "style," a "way of seeing the world and expressing oneself" recurring at crisis moments "over a long span of time and in different places" (4, 39).

Citing Davis's "remarkable essay," Hofstadter reiterated the exponent's identification with the imagined conspirator and symbolic enactment of forbidden fantasies (33–34). But his primary focus was a series of errors common to conspiracy thinking. First, paranoid stylists perceive history "in apocalyptic terms," the conspiracy marking the convergence of an encompassing history on an ultimate crisis moment (29–30). Second, conspiracy theorists envision a Manichean opposition between themselves and the enemy, and accordingly cannot "see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised" (31). Third, the enemy as "a free, active, demonic agent" is free of "the toils of the vast mechanism of history" (32), and "decisive events" become "consequences of someone's will" (32). Fourth, the theorist exhibits "the elaborate concern with demonstration" in his "heroic strivings for 'evidence'" of conspiracies (35–36). And finally, the conspiratorial mentality is "intensely rationalistic," compulsively ordering a fantasy world to leave "no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities" (36). Conspiracy theory, then, is an amalgam of historical fallacies, such that paranoid stylists "see only the consequences of power—and this through distorting lenses—and have little chance to observe its actual machinery" (39–40).

Yet the two most decisive accounts of conspiracy theory, those of Bailyn and Gordon Wood, were yet to come. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* would appear in 1967, an expansion of the 1965 introduction to *Pamphlets of the American Revolution*. There Bailyn parenthetically appended "A Note on Conspiracy" to a chapter on "The Logic of Rebellion," arguing that conspiracy theory was integral to the logic of republicanism. Conspiracy fears had "deep and widespread roots" in eighteenth-century Anglo-American culture, in Whig political theory and nonconformist rhetoric (144). With the conflicts of the 1760s, then, "an escalating mutuality of conspiratorial fears" emerged as the dominant form of political explanation for American revolutionaries and Loyalists (144, 153). The "substance" of the Declaration of Independence became "the enumeration of conspiratorial efforts," and the next decades of political thought perpetuated variations on the same theme (155–57). Such phantasms persisted because they "settled easily into a structure of historical interpretation" (157).

Fifteen years later, Bailyn's student Wood gave this analysis deeper foundations, reacting in part to the misguided pathologizing of the Founders inspired by Hofstadter, in part to naive defenses of conspiratorial thinking ("Conspiracy" 405–06). Where Bailyn situated conspiratorial visions in North Atlantic political and religious ideologies, Wood offered "a quite different, wider

perspective on this mode of thinking,” grounded in “the general presuppositions and conventions . . . of eighteenth-century culture” (406–07). If conspiratorial analyses were warranted during antiquity and the Renaissance, when “the simplicity and limitedness of politics” confirmed such explanations (409–10), “conspiratorial interpretations of the Augustan Age,” by contrast, “flowed from the expansion and increasing complexity of the political world” (410). As politics and administrative bodies increased in scale, as social relations became more complex and impersonal, as the actions of elites were increasingly scrutinized, “people became uncertain of what was who and who was doing what” (410). Enlightenment thought, with its emphasis upon clear “mechanistic cause and effect,” offered a model for a “man-centered causal history” stressing motives, intentions, and individual moral responsibility, all of which could be arranged as patterns (413–19). To amend Bailyn, then: “It was neither the atmosphere of whiggish suspicion and mistrust nor the Christian tradition of a deceitful Satan that was fundamental to the age’s susceptibility to conspiratorial interpretations. . . . What was *fundamental* is that American secular thought—in fact, *all* enlightened thought of the eighteenth century—was structured in such a way that conspiratorial explanations of complex events became normal, *necessary*, and rational” (420–21, emphases added). Granted, certain material factors were relevant as well, such as distance from power (424), but one could never lose sight of the larger framework of “modern Western thought” (432).

The Bailyn and Wood accounts thus raised conspiracy theory to an integral component of an all-encompassing idea system. While adhering to the view of conspiracy as an ideological style pace Davis and Hofstadter, Bailyn and Wood no longer relegated conspiracy thought to anxiety-ridden segments of the culture or moments of crisis. Both viewed conspiracy thought as constitutive of eighteenth-century thought, the “logic of rebellion,” the Declaration, even Enlightenment metaphysics. Revolutionary era conspiracy theories were not prompted by some crisis, but helped bring it about. This is not to say that Bailyn and Wood legitimated conspiracy theory: such thought remains fallacious, Wood writing that today, “those who continue to attribute combinations of events to deliberate human design may well be peculiar sorts of persons—marginal people, perhaps, removed from the centers of power, unable to grasp the conceptions of complicated causal linkages offered by sophisticated social scientists” (441). But early American conspiracy thinkers could not avoid their errors, which were inescapable and constitutive of the moment.

What was at stake in this cumulative explication of conspir-

acy theory? Each account used conspiracy theory as a symptom from which to diagnose errors of historical analysis, three predominating. Conspiracy theory identified some ideologies as false consciousness to be overcome and corrected. It then asserted agendas not accessible to public or “surface” discourses. And finally, it posited dishonest or ironic forms of cultural expression used by conspirators to achieve those agendas. Conspiracy theories thus asserted a cultural field of layered communication, some more basic than others, and shaped in part by something loosely characterized as “material.” But conspiracy theory also served as a foil against which to construct an alternative historiography in which the status of ideologies would be expanded and reworked. Ideas, Wood complained, had shriveled to “rationalizations, as masks obscuring the underlying interests and drives that actually determined social behavior” (“Rhetoric” 57).

This alternative framework was, of course, what has come to be known as the “republican synthesis.”<sup>3</sup> The masterworks of this interpretive school—generally considered to be Bailyn’s *Ideological Origins*, Wood’s *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (1969), and Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (1975)—sought to explain the American Revolution through the immanent working of ideas. Bailyn cast the Revolution as primarily an ideological movement, a “great, transforming debate” over “intellectual problems” that made it possible for the colonists to “probe and alter their inheritance of thought concerning liberty” (*Ideological* 21, 198, 230). Or, as Wood stated, the great achievement of the revolutionaries was that they had “broken through the conception of political theory that had imprisoned men’s minds for centuries and brilliantly reconstructed the framework for a new republican polity” (*Creation* 614). More precisely, republican synthesizers catalogued a constellation of shared notions and values of “Americans” who

believed that what made republics great or ultimately destroyed them was not the force of arms but the character and spirit of the people. Public virtue, as the essential prerequisite for good government, was all-important. . . . Since furthering the public good—the exclusive purpose of republican government—required the constant sacrifice of individual interests to the greater needs of the whole, the people, conceived of as a homogeneous body (especially when set against their rulers), became the great determinant of whether a republic lived or died. Thus republicanism meant maintaining public and private virtue, internal unity, social solidarity, and vigi-

lance against the corruptions of power. (Shalhope, “Republicanism” 334–35)

In sum, republicanism denoted an ideological consensus combining virtues of moderation with a whiggish political theory in an all-encompassing “form of life” (Wood’s term: *Radicalism* 96) to which institutions and events were secondary. Like the poststructuralist construct of “discourse” taking shape at roughly the same moment, republicanist “ideology” would encompass subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and materiality—in short the comprehensive cultural content of the human world.

It should thus come as no surprise that the republican synthesizers should prove extremely influential for poststructuralist scholars of early America, even while facing challenges from historians.<sup>4</sup> Their emphasis upon the discursive origins of America, exemplified in the ongoing print-speech debate,<sup>5</sup> fits neatly with the synthesizers’ assessment of the “great, transforming debate.” Among the most prominent pieces of recent criticism, Michael Warner’s *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (1990) enthusiastically endorsed Bailyn’s assessment of “an intellectual’s revolution” (67), cited the republicanist analysis as “now relatively uncontroversial” (187n60), and interpreted early national culture through a republican lens.<sup>6</sup> More recent studies have moved on to explore tensions between republicanism and one or more related ideological systems. Drawing heavily upon Pocock, the most nuanced of the synthesizers, Bruce Burgett’s *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic* emphasizes a constitutive tension between republicanism and liberalism; while Christopher Looby’s *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (1996) posits a “revolutionary rhetorical hybridity” uniting “two powerful idioms, that of Protestant millennialism and that of classical republicanism” (224).<sup>7</sup> But in these cases the ideological repertoire is merely expanded, while the insistence on discursive constitution is maintained. Whatever the complications of Foucauldian epistemes, they coincide nicely with the synthesizers’ emphasis on grand value-systems and ideological periods, in fighting off structural and conflict-based theories of history and their correlative concern with ideology-as-false-consciousness.

It follows, then, that literary critics have also embraced the discursive analyses of conspiracy theory recounted above. And in their writings the framing of conspiratorial rhetoric as the “extreme distrust of representation” (Gustafson 23) does double

duty, situating past conflicts in the realm of discourse while pathologizing attempts to seek history “beneath” language. The most sustained study of early conspiratorial rhetoric, Robert Levine’s *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (1989), focuses on “the discursive energies, conflicts, desires, and anxieties” of early America (2), and the use of conspiracy theory in community and nation formation in an environment of “fragile newness” (9). In his reading of George Washington’s “Farewell Address”—the canonical conspiracy text of early America—Levine argues that the president “attempted to re-create community by calling attention to conspiratorial threats against it” (5), demonstrating the “need for conspirators” in the project of nation formation (7, 9). Conspiracy theory here becomes a “rhetoric,” a narrative form, a conceptual “network” situated not in immediate social conflicts but rather in the “vaguely defined space” of the nation (12). Levine makes gestures toward possible historical referents, true, but these plots (like the Shaysite Rebellion) are typically alarming signals fueling republican anxieties.<sup>8</sup> Thus the guiding thesis of his work is that “conspiratorial discourse more often than not manifests at its least flexible and most repressive a culture’s dominant ideology—the network of beliefs, values, and, especially, fears and prejudices that help social groups to construct and make sense of their social identity and reality” (12).<sup>9</sup>

My criticism here is *not* directed at the more careful analysis of discursive tensions: Lenin was right to insist that an intelligent idealism is preferable to a stupid materialism. Levine’s focus on conspiratorial discourse-as-discourse opens up a rich account, for instance, of Charles Brockden Brown’s insights on early national cultural and psychological dynamics.<sup>10</sup> My concern, rather, is with what these denials of conspiracy dismiss and ignore, for their leveling of the early national period to the circulation of surface discourses methodologically prohibits the explication of certain cultural structures. Levine writes of Carwin, the ventriloquizing conspirator of Brown’s *Wieland* (1798), “the problem of whether to view Carwin as a political conspirator is beside the point, for it becomes increasingly clear that the society at the summerhouse-temple bequeathed by the paranoid elder Wieland is in such precarious balance that Carwin’s possible affiliation with subversives had no bearing at all on his destructive power as originator of voices” (28). The possibility that Brown’s portrait of Carwin was offering an analysis of significant modes of political cultures is categorically dismissed.<sup>11</sup> In totalizing accounts of conspiratorial discourse, sociological particularities are irrelevant, even taboo.



## 2. . . . as Structural Analysis

A move beyond the discursive leveling of conspiracy theory should turn from the more sensational—and exceptional—accounts of conspiracies, like those of the Illuminati, to patterns of conspiratorial action common in eighteenth-century America. Herbert Aptheker, in a thesis still largely ignored by cultural critics, long ago argued that “widespread fear of servile rebellion” by enslaved blacks was a defining feature of antebellum America and the Caribbean (18). In 1774 Madison wrote Philadelphia printer William Bradford that slaves in Orange County, Virginia, were conspiring to escape if and when British troops arrived in the area; Bradford responded that there were similar local rumors of British plans to encourage such rebellions (Nash 44). In 1776, a Bucks County Committee of Safety received a request for ammunition to assuage “fears about Negroes & disaffected people injuring their families when they are in the Service” (qtd. in Aptheker 22)—fears common during times of military conflict, according to Aptheker.

Such examples of conspiratorial thinking hardly seem as preposterous as the fears of international Freemasonry, grounded as they are in a milieu of extensive conspiratorial practices, small-scale and large. We know, for example, that much flight activity was conspiratorial, involving collective action and secrecy.<sup>12</sup> Large-scale actions against whites throughout the mainland and Caribbean colonies, news of which was surely spread by sailors, traders and papers, undoubtedly served a greater tutorial function. A 1741 conspiracy in New York City, bringing together “Irish, English, Hispanic, African, and native American men and women” but largely perceived as a slave rebellion, led to the burning of a fort, the governor’s mansion, and other government buildings. Ultimately 34 participants were executed and 77 transported (Linebaugh and Rediker 225–26). Conspiracy was also a constant threat in the slave trade. There are at least 155 documented cases of captives collectively rebelling on ships (Rediker 49n86; Rawley 299–300), and it became policy among traders to carefully select polyglot human cargoes to prevent communication and organization. Aptheker chronicles numerous insurrectionary outbursts occurring in the South during the military conflict with Britain, many related to the British war policy described by Madison. And of course the Haitian Revolution and Gabriel’s rebellion (1800) illustrated the effectiveness of conspiratorial planning as prelude to violent resistance. Fear of immediate conspiracy may have been unwarranted in some cases, with whites overestimating the organizational and insurrectionary options for blacks in their midst—

but there must have been cases in which whites *underestimated* the potential for black collective resistance as well. There is no doubt that, whatever the scale, conspiracies to escape, congregate, commit sabotage, or rebel fundamentally defined early American social relations.

Decades later, Frederick Douglass made the conspiratorial dimensions of black culture a central part of his account of slavery, speaking of codes adopted by slaves and white misperceptions. Toward the end of his 1845 autobiography, criticizing the “very public manner” in which the underground railroad had become the “*upperground railroad*,” he called for a conspiratorial *intensification* of black resistance in an argument of great cultural significance. He found that

those open declarations [of planned escape] are a positive evil to the slaves remaining, who are seeking to escape. They do nothing towards enlightening the slave, whilst they do much towards enlightening the master. . . . I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave. I would leave him to imagine himself surrounded by myriads of invisible tormentors, ever ready to snatch from his infernal grasp his trembling prey. Let him be left to feel his way in the dark; let darkness commensurate with his crime hover over him; and let him feel that at every step he takes, in pursuit of the flying bondman, he is running the frightful risk of having his hot brains dashed out by an invisible agency. (85)

Douglass’s active promotion of the “paranoid style” is grounded in the praxis of both organized flight and resistance—his “invisible agency”—and, harkening back to his discussion of the overseer Covey, practices of slaveowners’ surveillance (56–57).

We should also recall the legal meaning of *conspiracy* during this period. Richard B. Morris maintains that in court practice, and in a time when free labor ideology was taking shape, the charge of conspiracy was often directed at labor combinations (137–38).<sup>13</sup> Morris outlines six common forms of combination predominant in the colonial period: monopolistic combinations by master workers to restrict access to vocations; worker-artisan-vendor actions, in licensed trades, to secure better fees or prices; combinations by bound workers for redress of grievances; anti-black combinations by white workmen; joint employer-employee action to promote war efforts; and journeyman combinations for better working conditions (136). Not all of these were conspiratorial or nonpublic; most were officially sanctioned and even pro-

motivated by authorities as valuable for economic regulation. Several such organizations were publicly prominent. But guild organizations also maintained a certain level of internal confidentiality in matters of wages and labor actions (Morris 142–43). In conflicts over statutory prices, or in general actions for better working conditions, combinations provided the infrastructure for coordinated economic actions (the concerted raising of prices, refusal to work without higher wages), and when such actions challenged ordinances, authorities could counter with conspiracy charges. Moral valences aside, the term is descriptively illuminating.<sup>14</sup>

These examples suggest, if not the “conspiracy of the bosses,” a range of conspiracies of producers, grounded in everyday praxis. It might be objected that such small- or medium-scale economic conspiracies simply confirm the pathology of paranoid thinking when translated as all-encompassing conspiracies of a political-institutional nature. I believe such a distinction is untenable, but here it would be useful to explore a case of revolutionary era conspiracy thinking and action.

An exemplary conspiracy theory can be found in the anti-Federalist essays of Philadelphia’s “Centinel” (most likely Samuel Bryan) around Pennsylvania’s ratification of the US Constitution. *Centinel* 12, one of the more high-pitched and accusatory pieces, charged the framers of the new constitution, Washington excepted, of four conspiratorial projects: (1) “extravagant fictions” promoted about the Constitutional Convention—particularly the unanimity resolution—creating a false sense of popular enthusiasm;<sup>15</sup> (2) the orchestrated rush of the ratification process, to prevent careful deliberation (*DC* 2: 82–83); (3) attempts “to suppress information and intimidate public discussion” in the press, through such tactics as libel suits, boycotts, and control of the Pennsylvania ratification convention’s transcripts (*DC* 2: 83–84); and (4) the actual system of government outlined in the Constitution, which seemed benign enough but would amount to “a many headed hydra of despotism, whose complicated and various evils would be infinitely more oppressive . . . than the scourge of any single tyrant” (*DC* 2: 84).<sup>16</sup> Republican synthesizers would have little problem absorbing this rhetoric into their interpretive framework: its emphasis upon the virtue of the opposition, its attribution of tyrannical agency to the Federalists, its alarmist construction of a political crisis, all mark it as one manifestation among thousands of republican thought. But before dismissing the *Centinel* as just another metaphysical primitive, we might consider his claims, the first three of which are relatively modest.

His first charge takes us immediately to a canonical text,

Benjamin Franklin's "Speech in the Convention at the Conclusion of Its Deliberations," "the literary masterpiece of the Convention" (Van Doren 756).<sup>17</sup> Franklin's speech unfolded a standard republican analysis, arguing that "there is no form of Government but what may be a Blessing to the People if well administered" (*DC* 1: 3); then, shifting the burden of good government from institutional form to popular will, it asserted that any form can fail "when the People shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government" (1: 3). Finally, reflecting upon the convention, it argued that no better constitution was possible, suggesting that the subsequent success of the new system hinged on positive popular opinion (1: 4). Franklin's closing exhortation then raised the imperative of unanimous consent: "I cannot help expressing a wish, that every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it, would with me on this occasion doubt a little of his own infallibility, and, to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this Instrument" (1: 4). The unanimity resolution was passed in the following form: "Done in Convention by the unanimous consent of *the States* present the 17th of Sepr. &c—In Witness whereof we have hereunto subscribed our names" (Madison 654).

The resolution and rationale seem almost innocuous, in keeping with republicanist rhetoric, and certainly not indicative of conspiratorial action. Madison's notes at the convention, however, reveal the strategic, performative dimensions of Franklin's speech and resolution. Madison noted that the resolution's "ambiguous form"—stressing "consent" of the *convention* if not the document, stressing the approval of the *states* if not all state delegates—"had been drawn up by Mr. G. M. [Gouverneur Morris] in order to gain the dissenting members, and put into the hands of Docr. Franklin that it might have the better chance of success" (654). This stratagem aimed, in the context of the convention, to conclude debate without further substantive objections and produce a statement with the appearance of unanimous support for the Constitution, since full unanimous support was not forthcoming. The maneuver was fairly successful on the first score;<sup>18</sup> ironically the real debate of the last session had to do with Franklin's "unanimous consent" proposal. Edmund Randolph declared he would not sign, while Hugh Williamson of North Carolina asked for a more indirect form of signing off, prompting Morris and Alexander Hamilton to reemphasize Franklin's point. Hamilton warned that "[a] few characters of consequence, by opposing or even refusing to sign the Constitution, might do infinite mischief by kindling the latent sparks which lurk under an enthusiasm in favor of the Convention which may soon subside" (656).

Ultimately only 3 of the 42 assembled delegates refused to give “the sanction of their names,” virtually giving the Federalists the appearance of unanimity they sought (659).

The unanimity strategy was orchestrated a second time when the Continental Congress arrived at another vague resolution with which to pass the Constitution to the states: “Congress having recd. the Report of the Convention lately assembled in Philada., Resold. unanimously that the said Report, with the Resolutions & letter accompanying the same, be transmitted to the several Legislatures, in order to be submitted to a Convention of Delegates chosen in each State by the people thereof” (*DC* 1: 43). In a private letter to Washington, Madison explained that here, as in the convention’s resolution, a “more direct approbation would have been of advantage,” since “stress will be laid on the agency of Congress in the matter, and a handle taken by adversaries of any ambiguity on the subject” (*DC* 1: 44). One critic of the Constitution developed a similar analysis in private correspondence: when Congress received the document, “a coalition of Monarchy men, Military Men, Aristocrats, and Drones” strove “to push the business on with great dispatch, & with as little opposition as possible; that it may be adopted before it has stood the test of Reflection & due examination” (*DC* 1: 45–46). Debate was cut off in order to “cram thus suddenly” the Constitution upon the states, and the transmission resolution passed, the word “Unanimously” inserted in the hopes “to have it mistaken for an Unanimous approbation” (*DC* 1: 46). Unless we assume that proratification delegates had no idea what they were doing, and were compelled by the imperatives of “eighteenth-century thought” to propose their unanimity resolutions, we can accept the Centinel’s first charge with some qualifications. Although it is not true, as Centinel claimed, that “discord prevailed to such a degree” among the framers “that the minority were upon the point of appealing to the public against the machinations of ambition” (*DC* 2: 82), there was enough dissent to worry supporters. Few “extravagant fictions,” perhaps, but Madison, Franklin, and others clearly painted an unwarranted picture of unified purpose and intent.

What of the Centinel’s second claim, that ratification was being rushed? In Pennsylvania, ratification was accomplished in under three months of the framing convention’s adjournment,<sup>19</sup> and the ratifying convention sat in session a mere 22 days. The speed of ratification can in large part be attributed to the process’s control and direction by the Federalists (known in Pennsylvania as Republicans), who controlled the state assembly that called the convention, then predominated in the election of convention delegates. Once the ratifying convention was convened, Republicans

determined the rules and format of debate to expedite an approval that most delegates viewed as inevitable, rejecting a plan for article-by-article votes while preventing the anti-Federalists (known as Constitutionists, for their support of Pennsylvania's 1776 constitution) from proposing or discussing amendments to the document.

Were these not the actions of a fairly elected majority? The Republicans had achieved control of the Pennsylvania assembly through elections, not a conspiratorial coup; they won the elections to the convention, without even nominating proratification assembly members; and within the convention all procedural decisions were voted upon. By contrast, a stronger case can be made that the Constitutionists conspired to subvert ratification. When the assembly met to plan the ratifying convention, Constitutionists walked out of the proceedings, leaving Republicans without a quorum and unable to proceed; only an angry crowd forcing two delegates back to the hall made a legitimate vote possible. And anti-Federalists may have tried to retard ratification with protracted debate and obstructive and illegitimate calls for amendments. But the Constitutionists had the advantage of a statutory timeline of deliberation in the 1776 state constitution, which called for prolonged public deliberation on laws and constitutional amendments.<sup>20</sup> In Pennsylvania these norms were clearly violated by Federalist maneuvers. Anti-Federalists would later complain that the haste of the preliminary proceedings contributed to the pitiful turnout for the delegates' elections: of 70,000 eligible voters, only 13,000 or so cast votes (*DC* 1: 531).<sup>21</sup> So while the anti-Federalists may have tried to impede ratification, these facts qualify, rather than negate, the Centinel's second claim.

The Federalists' main procedural consistency, to take up the Centinel's third charge, came with their suppression of documentation of voting rationales. Article 14 of the 1776 constitution gave any assembly member "a right to insert the reasons of his vote upon the minutes, if he so desires it," requiring these minutes be printed weekly (*Proceedings* 59). In the vote on the insertion provision at the ratifying convention, anti-Federalist Robert Whitehill complained that "unless we are allowed to insert our reasons, the yeas and nays will be a barren document, from which the public can derive no information, and the minority no justification of their conduct" (*Jensen* 2: 371). Benjamin Rush, a leading Republican, warned that granting insertion would lead to "the whole debates of the Convention [being] intruded upon the journals," causing a "procrastination" that would be "intolerable" (*Jensen* 2: 372). James Wilson echoed these complaints, express-

ing concern at how insertion could force the convention to “employ the whole winter in carrying on a paper war . . . spreading clamor and dissension” (Jensen 2: 375). But anti-Federalist John Smilie’s remarks on insertion may reveal the Federalists’ greatest concern:

[L]et us suppose . . . what I believe to be the real ground of opposition, that the protests should produce a change in the minds of the people and incline them to new measures. . . . I take it, sir, that even after this Convention shall have agreed to ratify the proposed plan, if the people on better information and maturer deliberation should think it a bad and improper form of government, they will still have a right to assemble another body to consult upon other measures and either in the whole, or in part, to abrogate this federal work so ratified. (Jensen 2: 376)

The Republicans prevailed, the insertion protocol was defeated, and at the end of the convention, the anti-Federalists had to print their long dissenting essay in the public press.

There are other instances of attempts to “suppress information and intimidate public discussion.” The day delegates were elected to the ratifying convention, Federalist crowds attacked the homes of various anti-Federalists, as well as a boarding house where some anti-Federalist delegates were staying; the goal apparently was to intimidate rather than harm. Targeted delegates complained to the assembly, which condemned the attacks but refused to order the attorney general to prosecute the rioters, and not a single Philadelphia newspaper reported the crowd actions (Jensen 2: 225). The Centinel’s most specific complaint concerned attacks on the *Pennsylvania Herald*, a Federalist newspaper that published anti-Federalist essays and accounts of the convention; Federalists organized a boycott that closed the paper.<sup>22</sup> In spite of these actions—or perhaps in response to them—anti-Federalist essays circulated quite widely within Philadelphia. Philadelphia’s opponents of the Constitution also became well-known throughout the states, their writings widely reprinted in newspapers and pamphlets. But the circulation and popularity of these texts aside, the Centinel’s third charge also seems legitimate.

I will return to the Centinel’s fourth charge below, in discussing *Federalist* No. 10. Taking the first three, though, it is fair to say that there *were* actions by political elites—Federalists and anti-Federalists—that warrant the proximate designation of conspiracy. These were not the diabolically inspired, all-reaching, and omniscient cabals attributed to the Illuminati, and if we think of

conspiracies solely in such Pynchonesque terms, we'll have to accept the dismissals of Bailyn and Wood. But if we define conspiracies more loosely, as programs of strategic action fashioned at a remove from public notice and either not acknowledged publicly or acknowledged only under coercion (or by defection); if we don't rigidly isolate these covert strategic programs from more open practices, with which they were often integrated; if we acknowledge the failures, limitations, and modest aims of covert action; if we conceptualize these instances of strategic action within a larger systemic framework; and if we don't conflate specious conspiracy theories with all charges of conspiracy, then it becomes impossible to dismiss the ubiquity and significance of conspiracies.

Particularly unhelpful is the false distinction between systems and structures on the one hand and conspiratorial plots on the other. Wood, as noted earlier, insisted that as long as eighteenth-century Americans thought in terms of "plots and deceptions" by groups, they could not grasp more complex models of structural causality ("Conspiracy" 429–31). But a strong argument can be made that *the more thoughtful treatments of conspiracy were fundamental to the formulation of systemic analyses*. Much conspiracy rhetoric discerned, and often emphasized, patterns and tendencies linking them with, and illuminating, broader systems. Abolitionists and slaveowners expressing alarm at slave conspiracies were each making "structural" arguments, the former suggesting that the conditions of slavery would inevitably generate conflict, the latter working to analyze and then combat the material conditions (e.g., literacy, chances to assemble, race mixing, stable family structures, communication between slave groups, importation of Caribbean slaves, the existence of maroon communities) that made secretive counterorganization possible. Late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century assaults on guilds and craft unions were primarily directed against economic impediments to the appropriation of surplus value, but had also learned to anticipate opposition from the illicit actions of guilds. And the Centinel's analysis stressed the structures essential to framing, deliberation, and ratification, finding strategic interventions with broader systemic consequences.

Conspiratorial acts and theories not only signaled systemic patterns and tendencies, they also typically necessitated knowledge of the same, since strategic actions had to anticipate characteristic structural and institutional responses. The Centinel's 18 essays against the Constitution are themselves exemplary in combining analysis of class and institutional structures with that of strategic combinations. The combination is best expressed in the commonplace, "What is the primary object of government, but to



check and control the ambitious and designing” (no. 5), stressing institutional checks on group actions. Other essays contained systemic analyses on a diverse range of political and social questions, including the institutional balance of powers (no.1); the dissipation of public criticism via the differentiation of governmental agencies (no.1); the importance of a free press and information exchange for an open society (nos.1, 9, 18); the jury system (no. 2); the dangers of standing armies as opposed to militia units (no. 2); the dynamics of a potential presidential council (no. 2); the proposed amendment procedures (no. 2); class conflicts within commerce (no. 4); macroeconomic distress as a motivating force behind the new constitution (no. 4); geographic size as related to administrative responsiveness (no. 5); potential administrative conflicts between state and national governments (nos. 5, 14); the importance of precedents (no. 8); the class impact of control over credit (no. 8); linkages between printers and the postal service (nos. 9, 11, 13, 14); the need for self-educating political societies (no. 13); and urban-rural political disparities (nos. 5, 18). The emphasis upon these systemic features is often uneven, sometimes inconsistent, and from a contemporary viewpoint, often disappointing: arguments about the intrinsic human lust for power receive as much attention as class questions, and inordinate attention is given to the machinations of elites. But a rudimentary institutional analysis is indisputably present, drawing upon, developing, and situating the more individualist arguments.

Furthermore, the more effective analyses of conspiracy *envisioned meaningful practical engagements with systems typically reified by social sciences*. Fredric Jameson has argued that conspiracy thinking amounts to “the beginning of wisdom” insofar as it signals an attempt “to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception” (*Geopolitical* 3,2); beyond that, “[n]othing is gained by having been persuaded of the definitive verisimilitude of this or that conspiratorial hypothesis” (3). But even this redemptive assessment understates the achievements of conspiracy thought, which often constitutes a vernacular attempt to think through a great conundrum of social theory, the relationship between agency and structure. Eighteenth-century conspiracy theories typically honed in upon the institutional junctures between collective agency and broader social systems, stressing the agentive potentials of those strategic spots. Antonio Gramsci once called for “the concrete analysis of the *relations of force*” (*Selections* 185, emphasis added), meaning the “organized economic and political expression” of historical moments (182). Such analysis would not be an end in itself, a means simply to describe social formations

more richly in a reified sociological fashion, but rather would contribute to “the science of organizations” by illuminating “a particular practical activity, or initiative of [party] will” (190, 185). Conspiracy theory might be seen as a tendentious version of this project, mapping the relations of forces and trying to make sense of a social formation dynamically characterized by organizational struggle. As in the Gramscian project, what is at stake is the illumination of political opportunities.

### 3. . . . as Cultural Analysis

The conspiratorial emphasis upon structure may be conceded, but critics of the paranoid style may still ask, Why the infantile emphasis on secrecy and deception? Why can't the Centinel make a more *complete* move to systemic analysis and leave behind the immature fixation on scheming? Peter Sloterdijk offers a useful observation here, in a review of enlightenment critiques of ideology: “The theory of deception is, in its reflective aspect, more complex than the politico-economic and the depth-psychological exposure theory” (29). In contrast to theories that reify ideologies as the necessary result of social, psychological, or discursive structures, understanding ideologies as the “artful” use of culture allows us to explore the “means of establishing knowledge” that “seem to be almost more important than the knowledge itself” (11). At stake for Sloterdijk is the historic “counteroffensive” against enlightenment, whereby “[m]odern elitism has to encode itself democratically” (15, 11). As challenges to traditional authority become popularized, authority must counter criticism from below by learning from it, adopting and appropriating its forms.

In an uncharacteristic lapse from republicanist argument, Wood characterized the Federalist era in similar terms, as “the beginning of a hiatus in American politics between ideology and motives”: “By using the most popular and democratic rhetoric available to explain and justify their aristocratic system . . . the Federalists in 1787 hastened the destruction of whatever chance there was in America for the growth of an avowedly aristocratic conception of politics and thereby contributed to the creation of that encompassing liberal tradition which has mitigated and often obscured the real social antagonisms of American politics” (*Creation* 562). What seems crucial here is the acknowledgment that Federalists, confronted with popular norms of politics, could not openly defend their interests and instead had to develop a cynical republicanism that could promote, yet hide, their program by encoding it democratically. The conflicts of the moment demanded

precisely the deception that many conspiracy theories sought to expose.<sup>23</sup>

We get a better sense of this counteroffensive examining the documents surrounding the Newburgh Conspiracy of 1783. As the war ended, nationalists in the Continental Congress were battling confederalists to establish a centralized source of income, specifically an impost tax, to ensure American credit. Consistently falling short of the requisite votes, some nationalists turned to the Continental Army stationed in Newburgh, New York, where many soldiers were concerned about their peacetime pensions; there was some public opposition to the very notion of military pensions and the creation of a military class, and the revenue source for pensions was unclear. In this context, nationalists told selected army officers that rumors of army unrest might motivate Congress to approve the impost *and* guarantee the military pensions. The officers responded accordingly, warning congressional authorities of possible mutiny. When the impost was still not passed, the nationalists heightened the pressure, and through various liaisons invited a group of officers to threaten—or appear to threaten—a coup d'état. These officers appear to have taken this project seriously, and in March 1783, two mutinous letters were distributed throughout the army camp.<sup>24</sup> The nationalists certainly did not want a coup, which, if effected, would likely undermine attempts to centralize power. So they also plotted the suppression of the military agitation by informing General Washington of the unrest. Washington appeared at an officers' agitational meeting, delivering a strategically prepared address credited with the suppression of the Newburgh plot. Nationalists, seizing upon these reports, managed to secure the votes for the impost.<sup>25</sup>

Again the nationalists' conspiracy is not the all-reaching, purely voluntarist design of paranoid fantasy, but rather one of strategic interventions (army agitation, Washington's suppression) linked to systemic structures (Congressional dynamics, military command structures). Like many such conspiracies, it did not master the structural complexities at stake; achieving the impost, nationalists soon found themselves facing a tremendous popular battle against army pensions (Kohn, "Inside" 216). But I want to focus not on the plot itself but on Washington's illuminating response to it. Were we simply to read Washington's "Speech to the Officers of the Army" (15 March 1783), we'd find a rehearsal of the "Farewell Address," linking fears of "the blackest designs" with a call for renewed military republicanism.<sup>26</sup> "You will defeat the insidious designs of our Enemies, who are compelled to resort from open force to secret Artifice," he concludes. "And you will, by the dignity of your Conduct, afford occasion for

Posterity to say, when speaking of the glorious example you have exhibited to Mankind, ‘had this day been wanting, the World had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining’” (500).

This reading is apparently confirmed by Washington’s correspondence prior to his 15 March address. Writing Hamilton, Washington noted, “There is something very misterious in this business. It appears, reports have been propagated in Philadelphia, that dangerous combinations were forming in the Army” (491). Washington linked this scheme with “public creditors” and “some members of Congress,” reiterating that “it is firmly believed, by *some*, the scheme was not only planned but also digested and matured in Philadelphia” (491). He then declared his plan to suppress the army mutiny and “rescue them from plunging themselves into a gulph of Civil horror from which there might be no receding” (492). But the discussion of conspiracy became more complicated as Washington pursued the matter. On 4 April, he informed Hamilton, “in strict confidence,” that some in the army “entertain[ed] suspicions that Congress, or some members of it . . . are to be made use of as mere Puppits to establish Continental funds; & that rather than not succeed in this measure, or weaken their ground, they would make a sacrafice of the Army and all its interests” (Hamilton 3: 315–16). In his response of 8 April, Hamilton correctly read this charge as directed at him—“I do not wonder at the suspicions that have been infused, nor should I be surprised to hear that I have been pointed out as one of the persons concerned,” he wrote—and confessed the plot to Washington, first explaining the conflict between states advocates and nationalists, then discussing the army’s significance. “In this situation what was to be done?” he asked. “It was essential to our cause that vigorous efforts should be made to restore public credit—it was necessary to combine all the motives to this end, that could operate upon different descriptions of persons in the different states. The necessity and discontents of the army presented themselves as a powerful engine” (318–19). He concluded: “I assure you upon my honor Sir I have given you a candid state of facts to the best of my judgment. The men against whom the suspicions you mention must be directed are in general the most sensible, the most liberal, the most independent and the most respectable characters in our body as well as the most unequivocal friends to the army. In a word they are the men who think continentally” (320–21). Hamilton also made sure to inform Washington that not “a single fact” substantiating the conspiracy could be found (319). The most illuminating document of this exchange, however, is Washington’s final response to Hamilton. Washington mitigated his earlier ac-

cusations, stating that he “only” wanted to explain the diverse “sentiments in the army”: “For these reasons I said, or meant to say, the army was a dangerous Engine to work with,” one in which the “groundwork of the superstructure” of conspiracy might “cut both ways” (*WGW* 10: 223–24).

What is most striking about this correspondence is less its open acknowledgment of conspiratorial acts than its *acceptance* of the conspiratorial mode. Having learned the details from Hamilton, who insisted that the plotting of the nationalists was not at odds with republican integrity, Washington’s assessment differs markedly from that suggested in his army address. For he complains not about the secret schemings of insidious foes—the schemers are, as suspected, allies—but instead stresses, with an interesting degree of structural and ideological complexity, the dangers of using the army. He endorses a diagnosis distinguishing a legitimate, nationalist base from its mutinous “superstructure,” raising the interesting possibility that Washington had all along understood—and accepted—his role in the plot. If the Centinel’s writings constitute what might be called a “first-order” conspiracy theory, identifying an alleged conspiracy, in Washington’s correspondence we find a “second-order” conspiracy theory, one that accepts the necessity of conspiracy while seeking greater effectivity. Accepting this, one finds a remarkable cynicism in Washington’s “official” condemnation of conspiracy. This “exposure” of Washington’s anticonspiratorial rhetoric does not, of course, give the lie to his republicanism, demonstrating him to be “really” concerned about raw economic interests. It *does* give us a sense of layered republicanism—a crude, unifying one for the Army; a more sophisticated one for Federalist elites—and of the strategic, “artful” uses of republican discourse.

In her *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (1996), Margaret Archer has lamented the “conceptual poverty” of cultural analysis, stressing in particular the “glaring lack of descriptive cultural ‘units’” (xii–xiii). She takes as her starting point the “Myth of Cultural Integration,” which levels something designated “culture” either as a determining system or as a superstructural epiphenomenon. Archer challenges this myth by distinguishing between what she labels “Cultural Systems” and “Socio-Cultural Interaction,” the former denoting the established “components of culture,” the latter describing the hermeneutics of everyday communication (xviii). Within such a schema, she hopes to differentiate between a body of religious doctrine and the expression of those beliefs in everyday communication, or, in the present case, between programmatic statements of republicanism and the “applied” republicanism of the various Newburgh ad-

dresses. The ultimate goal is to uncover contradictions and transformations and thereby illuminate mediations between culture and agency. I mention Archer's analysis not to endorse her conclusions, but to foreground the important problems her work attempts to tackle: How do we explain conflicting expressions of what otherwise appear to be the same values and beliefs? How do these expressions inform the acts of conflicting or cooperating agents? Are there analytically meaningful "units" of culture? If so, what?

In fact, these are the questions treated in many conspiracy theories, as the Newburgh documents illustrate. Washington's address to assembled officers, for instance, was staged strategically. He had ordered a meeting of officers, indicating he would not be attending. He arrived at the meeting just as it started, delivered his prepared speech, and produced a letter from a congressman affirming support for the army. He hesitated in reading the letter, fumbled for his glasses, and allegedly declared, "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country" (Flexner 507). Most reports of the meeting describe stunned silence and tears in response to this performance, after which Washington rode away. Poststructuralist critics, influenced in particular by Jay Fliegelman's *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (1993), would likely read this kind of rhetorical gesture as an integrated, constitutive part of republicanism, refusing to separate the performative from the "real."<sup>27</sup> Washington's gesture of physical weakness, they might say, was integral to his expression of republicanism, not some empty gesture. I agree, insofar as it misleads to evacuate the gesture of cultural meaning. But Washington's performance also signals a differentiated republicanism suitable for the military sphere, one in which authoritative expression of shared values and fraternity is made possible by an existing hierarchical structure, an inversion of the deferential republicanism he demanded the officers show the civil government.

Washington's cultural performance, then, is intimately bound to the structural analyses of his second-order conspiracy theorizing. He had warned Hamilton that the volatile republicanism of the army could be directed at the nationalists, since, given the lineage of the army from state militias, some soldiers might ally themselves with state forces. He thus linked an ideological configuration with an institutional configuration—cultural with structural analysis—first seeing the army as an organization with a common history of hardship and therefore capable of mobilization, then qualifying that contemplating various institutional con-

junctions (from militia units to states, from the Continental Army to the Congress) complicated the initial formula. We might say, to return to Archer, that conspiracy theory, in mapping both the structure-agency relation and the culture-agency relation, provides a methodological means of mapping meaningful cultural units. Hamilton and Washington assumed cultural continuities *and distinctions* between army, Congress, and the revolutionary public sphere, and developed overlapping structural maps in an attempt to connect (or disconnect) those cultural variants, suggesting that *the conspiratorial project maps structures in order to determine the flow and texture of culture*.

This second-order conspiratorial rhetoric, as a type of cultural mapping, should not be overly individualized. In a discussion of group cultures, Jameson argues that the “anthropologist-other” viewing the cultural collective is not a lone observer, but “stands in for a whole social group.” He continues, “it is in this sense that his knowledge is a form of power, where ‘knowledge’ designates something individual, and ‘power’ tries to characterize that mode of relationship between groups for which our vocabulary is so poor” (“On *Cultural Studies*” 272). The second-order conspiracy theorist is something like the anthropologist insofar as attempts to unite structure, agency, and culture must emerge from a standpoint in one or more collectives. As with the Centinel’s structural knowledge, we cannot overexaggerate the cognitive value of conspiracy theorizing, which would have to be complemented with observations from other groups. Nor are such insights restricted to moments of conspiratorial *practice*, for this kind of cultural analysis informs the more general political theory of the period which, in seeking to abstract general principles, serves not as the starting point for a trickle-down theory of culture but as the cumulative arrangement of more local analyses.

A useful example is that master text of class-state relations in America, Madison’s *Federalist* No. 10, which famously envisioned a state achieving the “regulation of these various and interfering interests” by channeling “the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of Government” (*DC* 1: 406). Although the new government’s task was to counter the “effects” rather than the “causes” of factionalism (*DC* 1: 407), this could not be done through some mechanistic process of dispersal: factions were not to perceive that they were blocked, but were to be brought into the government to continue acting as interest groups. What would check their success was not solely the absolute, objective complexity of the constitutional apparatus, but, just as importantly, its perspectival murkiness. Hence the importance, for Madison, of the republic’s size and processes of delegation. “Ex-

tend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests," Madison writes; "you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, *it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other*" (410, emphasis added).

The structural discourse of quantity then coordinates a dialectical argument about cultural cognition. With its extensiveness, the Federal State will promote perception and analysis of the republican totality—the Big Picture transcending the “local” prejudices of class. The same extensiveness, however, will also prevent subfactions from discovering or acting. The point here is not that Federalist totalizers are smarter or have a better vantage point than Factionalists: Madison acknowledges that the new program cannot rely upon “enlightened statesmen” (407). The crucial point, rather, is that structures will delimit any political “enlightenment” by imposing the grand vista—which will always favor Capital—while obscuring perceptions of immediate factional projects. Madison inverts this insight in his warning about the upper and lower size limits of the federal republic: “in this, as in most other cases, there is a mean”—a *cognitive* as well as practical mean—“on both sides of which inconveniences will be found to lie” (410). If the federal republic is too small, factions can “more easily . . . concert and execute their plans of oppression” (410), while if it’s too big, the Federalist might succumb to “the confusion of the multitude” (409). Here the twin evils of Democracy (the too-small state) and Anarchy (the too-large electoral district) are respectively Too Great Transparency and Too Confusing Obscurity.

A reading of *Federalist* No. 10 stressing its communicative arguments, then, will see the constitutional system as less a functionalist machine for mediating conflicts between interests than a reactive cultural project that doesn’t want to be seen as such; not simply a mechanism but more fundamentally a puzzle in the form of a system; in other words, a crafted program of counterenlightenment that we might call a “third-order” conspiracy theory. The Constitution, as envisioned by Madison, combines the structural and cultural dimensions of conspiracy theory in a governmental frame in which the intentionality of deception and secrecy become institutionalized and codified. *Federalist* No. 10 does not theorize a more perfect conspiracy, though its analysis of factions and order is clearly informed by such theories and practices. Rather, drawing upon the cultural and structural insights of conspiracy theories, and trying to short-circuit systematically the possibilities for the meaningful conjunction of structure and cul-



ture, Madison proposes a system that will bring an end to all meaningful conspiracies—his own included.

#### 4. Periodization

An important question remains: Whence the ubiquity of conspiracy theories—or of conspiracies—in the early national period? In an influential study of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James famously wrote about early America’s “thinly-composed society” (36):

[O]ne might enumerate the items of high civilisation, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, . . . no great Universities nor public schools . . . ; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class.

“Some such list as that,” he concludes, “might be drawn up of the absent things in American life” (34–35). In fact, something very much the reverse informs early national culture: the tremendous and explosive appearance and growth of cultural, political, and economic institutions in the colonial and early national period. This is what Michael Mann calls a moment of extensive “interstitial emergence” allowing new forms of collective practices and social organization (16). Mann’s analytic, challenging the false view of societies as “totalities,” insists that “[s]ocieties are constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power” (1), and that societal structures must be examined “in terms of the interrelations” between networks (2), for always, “human beings are tunneling ahead to achieve their goals, forming new networks, extending old ones, and emerging most clearly into our view with rival configurations of one or more of the principal power networks” (16).

The American colonial and early national period is such a moment of “interstitial emergence,” as the ad hoc enterprises of colonization fostered a particularly open institutional field. This phenomenon needs to be examined with attention to colonial-state specificities, but Pennsylvania may illustrate the point. European settlement essentially began in the late 1680s; nonnative popula-

tion jumped from about 9,000 in 1690 to 73,000 in 1740, 175,000 in 1760, and 308,000 in 1790 (Lemon 23). Much of this growth was concentrated in Philadelphia—its population jumped from about 5,000 in 1720 to over 32,000 in 1775—but most was rural, producing simultaneously rapid urbanization and rapid ruralization, with the accompanying rapid institutional improvisations those terms imply. The most ethnically diverse population among the thirteen colonies meant a wide range of religious-cultural institutions without any hegemonic consolidation. Like many colonies, Pennsylvania experienced a number of charters and constitutions, while its divided government fostered constant legal, juridical, mercantile, and administrative innovations. Economic cycles, shifting trade orientations, periods of warfare, and changing policies toward enslavement and indenturement meant a range of economic and military innovations. A complex configuration of Native American polities, of which the Iroquois, the Shawnee, and the Delaware were the most numerous, meant constantly developing institutional forms to the west. One can cite the emergence of printing and publishing in the area, indexed by the shift from two English-language newspapers in 1750 to 12 in 1796 (Lathem). One can recount the municipal institutions discussed in Franklin's *Autobiography* (1771–90): militia organizations, fire departments, libraries, universities, hospitals, clubs, scientific societies. And finally, one can observe an astonishing proliferation of corporate charters from the 1790s until about 1820. Rarely were these institutional innovations, adaptations, and modifications developed without European antecedents (in almost no case was a European institution simply reproduced), although contact between Native Americans and Euro-Americans certainly generated unique political forms, as did enslavement of African Americans.

If we assume a broad cultural discourse of republicanism, this institutional field marks significant divergences and variations. For the republicanism articulated within a jury will be different from that expressed within the domestic sphere, during the food riot, or at the Indian treaty. I mentioned before that recent poststructuralist adaptations of the republican synthesis have stressed other complementary discourses. It would be a mistake, however, to view these other discourses as free-floating ideological systems *also* constitutive of “early America,” such that we simply seek moments of “instantiation,” “articulation,” or “negotiation” inherent in these encounters. Rather, these seemingly discursive tensions mark *institutional* distinctions, conflicts, and developments. To insist, pace Pocock or Burgett, that republicanism and liberalism are inseparable discourses bound with certain constitutive tensions is to argue backward—or from the top down—

starting with the grandest social theory in which the tensions between market and state will be evident. The republicanism of the army, for example, or the liberalism of the trading firm, may *not* be defined by such a tension, which must instead be found in the institutional field that shapes it.

The lineages of these early national collectives—what Jean-Paul Sartre more descriptively called “practical ensembles”—must be carefully charted, and conspiracy theory provides those crude (though sometimes detailed) initial charts. And at stake here is not (just) a question of greater historical accuracy. Equally vital is the better understanding of the production and praxis of culture, for so many of the institutional innovations of the period emerge not from some functionalist mechanism but from the vernacular tracing of the social field. Conspiracies offer perhaps the best illustration of this cultural praxis, for in many instances they were organizational innovations made in response to an unconsolidated institutional field. Conspiracy *theories* in turn mark an important dialectical response to late colonial modernity, offering a model of *structural analysis from within* that assesses and creatively directs innovations within developing ensembles, always attuned to the ways in which early citizens and noncitizens sensed the shakiness, or restrictiveness, or potentialities of emergent social structures. Cultural critics working on the colonial and early national periods have certainly written extensively, in recent decades, about the “construction” of race, gender, nation, the public sphere, etc., but their reliance upon *discursive* construction, and their untheorized leveling of discursive practices, threatens to obliterate popular voices and misunderstand those of the elites. A more productive mapping of such “constructions” would start with the structural, cultural, institutional coordinates suggested by conspiracy theory.

*Conspiracy theories . . . mark an important dialectical response to late colonial modernity, offering a model of structural analysis from within that assesses and creatively directs innovations within developing ensembles, always attuned to the ways in which early citizens and noncitizens sensed the shakiness, or restrictiveness, or potentialities of emergent social structures.*

## Notes

1. “Though much can be said for this sociological emphasis, as opposed to a search for irrational myths and stereotypes,” Davis wrote, the former method “can easily lead to a simple ‘stimulus-response’ view of prejudice. Awareness of actual conflicts in status and self-interest should not obscure the social and psychological functions of nativism, nor distract attention from themes that may reflect fundamental tensions within a culture” (205–06n1).
2. The 1963 Herbert Spencer Lecture at Oxford, an abridgment of which was printed in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1964. An expanded version commences *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (1964).
3. The term originates with Robert Shalhope’s 1972 review essay, “Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in

American Historiography" (1972), which usefully, if tendentiously, chronicles the intellectual history upon which Bailyn and Wood draw.

4. These generally stressed the need to ground ideological analysis "in circumstances, environment, and experience" (Shalhope, "Republicanism" 336).

5. See, e.g., Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986); Robert A. Ferguson, *Law and Letters in American Culture* (1984); Fliegelman; Albert Furtwangler, *American Silhouettes: Rhetorical Identities of the Founders* (1987); Warner; Larzer Ziff, *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print, and Politics in the Early United States* (1991); Michael T. Gilmore, "The Literature of the Revolutionary and Early National Periods" (1992); Gustafson; Michael P. Kramer, *Imagining Language in America: From Revolution to the Civil War* (1992); Alessandro Portelli, *The Text and the Voice: Writing, Speaking, and Democracy in American Literature* (1994); and Looby.

6. See also Ferguson, "'We Hold These Truths': Strategies of Control in the Literature of the Founders" (1986) (1–2), and Mark R. Patterson, *Authority, Autonomy, and Representation in American Literature, 1776–1865* (1988).

7. Cf. Gustafson's work on "an archaeology of sovereign discourses" (15).

8. On the "Shays's Rebellion" as a symptom, see 9. The four chapters of Levine's book pair an American writer with a body of conspiracy discourse, generally "preposterous" (17) as in the case of the Illuminati (Brown), anti-Masonry (Cooper), and anti-Catholicism (Hawthorne). Levine's argument changes in interesting ways in the last chapter, however, when he discusses Melville in the context of slave rebellions and the Slave Power Conspiracy.

9. See also Warner's complaints about the "revival of old talk about the conspiracy of the bosses" and "the still-popular notion of media manipulation" ("Mass Public" 246, 256n15).

10. See, e.g., 28 and 41.

11. In "Carwin the Peasant Rebel," I argue that Brown specifically presents Carwin as a rural insurgent, offering an important commentary on the cultural and structural dimensions of rural-urban conflict in eighteenth-century America.

12. See John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger's *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation, 1790–1860* (1999).

13. See also Christopher L. Tomlins, *Law, Labor, and Ideology in the Early American Republic* (1993), ch. 4.

14. Obviously slave and wage-labor conspiracies significantly overlap. In light of the prosecution of bakers in New York in 1741, the year of the "great Negro plot," Morris explores correlations between conspiracy charges against blacks and whites (163–65). One might also consider marine mutiny, the conspiratorial actions of seamen in the isolated and coercive workplace of the ship at sea, discussed by Rediker.

15. *Centinel* 12, in Bailyn, ed., *The Debate on the Constitution* (2: 82) (hereafter cited as *DC*).
16. The essay appeared in the 23 January 1788 issue of the Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*. For the texts of all 18 *Centinel* essays, see Herbert Storing, ed., *The Complete Anti-Federalist* (1981) (2: 136–213); for provenance, see 2: 130–36. I cite *DC*, which reproduces essays 1, 2, 3, 12, and 16.
17. Bailyn states that Franklin’s speech was reprinted “in almost every state, a total of 36 times before mid-February 1788” (*DC* 1: 1138).
18. The only amendment offered on 17 September was Nathaniel Gorham’s proposal to change the House apportionment figure; the proposal was endorsed by Washington, then approved unanimously (Madison 655).
19. The convention had adjourned 17 September; the ratification vote in the Pennsylvania convention came on 13 December.
20. See sections 15 and 47 (*Proceedings* 59, 65).
21. Charles Beard estimated that nationwide, of half a million potential voters, probably 160,000 votes were cast, 100,000 for Federalists (250), figures Forrest McDonald, Beard’s leading critic, found “remarkably accurate” (14n11). The low turnout cannot be blamed solely on procedure, though it was undoubtedly a factor.
22. For a more detailed account of Federalist and anti-Federalist action during ratification, see Robert Brunhouse 200–15.
23. A whole range of revolutionaries had learned important lessons in covert organization, often as they worked to counteract wartime democratic tendencies. New York elites, concerned lest they be subjected to a democratic state constitution like that of Pennsylvania, formed what one elite called a “Council of Conspiracy” and with “well-timed delays, indefatigable industry and minute . . . attention to every favourable circumstance” achieved a more traditional document (qtd. in Countryman 166).
24. The Newburgh Address, the text of which can be found in John Rhodehamel, 774–77.
25. I draw here on the partially speculative narrative offered by Richard Kohn in 1970, and restated in *Eagle and Sword: The Beginnings of the Military Establishment in America, 1783–1802* (1975).
26. *Writings* 496. All references to Washington’s writings come from the Library of America edition, with one exception, from Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Writings of George Washington*, cited parenthetically as *WGW*.
27. In a representative passage, Fliegelman writes, “Eighteenth-century public speaking . . . involved a drama of competing understandings of orality. In one view orality was ‘an inner voice of emotion’ and an expression of subjectivity. In another it was ‘public-oriented oratorical communication,’ a mode of expression

in which national values and a common sensibility were to be articulated and re-inforced or (if romanticized as preliterate) recovered" (15). The generalization of "eighteenth-century public speaking" and the concomitant use of the passive voice recur throughout his argument.

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