

**Book review**

# Conspiracy theories in the Nordic countries

*Niko Pyrhönen, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Helsinki*

**Book title**

Astapova, A., Bergmann, E., Dyrendal, A., Rabo, A., Rasmussen, K.G., Thórisdóttir, H. and Önnersfors, A. (2021) Conspiracy Theories and the Nordic Countries. New York: Routledge.

The long-standing reputation and self-understanding of the Nordic countries as places for prosperity and equality has rendered them an intriguing context for studying conspiracy theories. The volume, authored by seven researchers, explores and analyzes the extent to which conspiracy stories and conspiratorial imagination manifest along the lines of global trends, and which features might be accentuated in the Nordic context. The collectively authored chapters focus on distinct realms marked by conspiratory articulation: the state and elites, family, gender and sexuality, migration, as well as exogenous conspiracism *about* the Nordic countries. The structure is logical and easy to follow, especially given that the chapters are intimately linked to each other, rather than advancing from one individual author's discrete area of expertise to the next, something that multi-author volumes are commonly haunted by.

The authors make a distinct effort in also opening the analysis for readers with little familiarity with the Nordic countries. The consistent contextualization opens up the political developments and social histories, particularly for Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, thereby rendering the text accessible and readily understandable even in passages that would otherwise require significant background knowledge. The example cases have been diligently selected to illustrate both locally emerging conspiracy theories—ranging from the sinking of *Estonia* to the murder of Swedish prime minister Olof Palme—and the Nordic renditions of globally circulating conspiracy stories, such as the 9/11 and *Eurabia*. Refreshingly, the history of conspiratory imagination revolving around secret societies has been traced back to the late 1700s, showing the range of political interests, particularly in Sweden, for either vilifying or supporting the Masonic order.

In the case of “fully-fledged conspiracy theories”, such as the aforementioned ones, questions related to epistemic authority, theodicy, and authentic beliefs might be relevant explanatory avenues, especially concerning the grass-roots level involvement and participation as prosumers or produsers. Analyses of this dimension of conspiracy theorizing are relatively infrequent, as only a smaller part of the volume covers distinct conspiracy theories.

Instead, among the main contributions of the volume is the consistent way in which it sheds light upon the political interests and motivations behind groups of people and associations circulating and participating in the development of *conspiracist imagination* into tools for political mobilization. While this type of political entrepreneurship also draws heavily from concrete conspiracy theories, the authors tend to focus on the penetration of these narratives into the mainstream spaces in a process whereby conspiratory content is operationalized in a very purposeful and opportunistic manner that gradually expands the Overton window for right-wing populist actors.

For instance, anti-immigrant political rhetoric, also in the Nordic countries, often makes use of phantasmal renditions of rampant sexuality allegedly characterizing the immigrant Other as well as sinister interests of the global and domestic elites in media, politics, and culture. Considering that such narratives are crafted so that they feel intuitive for wider audiences forming a potential electorate, actual conspiracy theories have been an important—but ultimately minor—component in the development of the dystopian mindscape in which right-wing populists and the radical right are deeply invested. As such, when these actors invoke the figure of a “liberal feminist” or a “cultural Marxist” as an alleged spearhead in a global conspiracy against “ordinary people”, they curate narrative components from tried and tested conspiracy theories in a manner that simultaneously reinvents and dilutes the theories they allude to. Moreover, “globalist” or “Soros-funded” is often just a handy slur in a political argument for a (populist) political entrepreneur who does not have facts on their side.

While the authors illustrate how conspiracy theorizing has had—and continues to have—national and regional specificities, they also explicitly distance themselves from any framework of Nordic exceptionalism. This supports the conclusion that Nordic countries, despite high levels of human development, are not inoculated against misinformation in general, or conspiracy theories in particular. When an increasingly transnational network of radical political and media entrepreneurs generates conspiratory content, the Nordic

particularities largely pertain to the means through which this content is being helped to find its way to the news cycle and public debates.