



Book review of Astapova,  
Anastasiya, Bergmann, Eirikur,  
Dyrendal, Asbjørn, Rabo,  
Annika, Grotle Rasmussen,  
Kasper, Thórisdóttir, Hulda  
and Önnarfors, Andreas 2021.  
*Conspiracy Theories and the  
Nordic Countries*. New York:  
Routledge, 126 pp

**BOOK REVIEW**

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**HUP** HELSINKI  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

In a time where contemporary politics is heavily affected by the rise of populist politics and conspiracy rhetoric, research on the topic in different contexts is extremely relevant and needed. The book *Conspiracy Theories and the Nordic Countries* was published in a larger series on conspiracy theories from Routledge, which is edited by Peter Knight, Professor of American Studies at the University of Manchester, UK, and Michael Butter, Professor of American Literary and Cultural history at the University of Tübingen. The book itself is the interdisciplinary work of Anastasiya Astapova, Eirikur Bergmann, Asbjørn Dyrendal, Annika Rabo, Kasper Grotle Rasmussen, Hulda Thórisdóttir and Andreas Önnarfors. It consists of six chapters, five of which are centered around different themes of conspiracy theories in and about the Nordic countries. Specifically, Chapter 4 is of interest to migration scholars as it deals with the conspiratorial rhetoric in anti-immigrant populist parties in the Nordic region.

The Nordic countries are often characterized as quite progressive states with their high degrees of welfare, trust in public institutions, taxes and happiness. The editors rightly point out that these similar countries are often ignored in research on conspiracy theories compared to the much more eruptive politics of America or Eastern Europe, which makes it all the more interesting to look at a disruptive phenomenon like conspiracy theories. The book, therefore, is a first attempt to explore the Nordic context in relation to recent research on conspiracy theories.

The main focus of the book is to take the first difficult step and provide an overview of the *kinds* of conspiracy theories that can be found in this region. While impossible to do comprehensively, the thematic chapters

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**KEYWORDS:**

Conspiracy Theories;  
Extremism; Populism;  
Politics; Nordic culture;  
Anti-immigration

**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Aarup, FG. 2023. Book  
review of Astapova,  
Anastasiya, Bergmann,  
Eirikur, Dyrendal, Asbjørn,  
Rabo, Annika, Grotle  
Rasmussen, Kasper,  
Thórisdóttir, Hulda and  
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*Conspiracy Theories and  
the Nordic Countries*. New  
York: Routledge, 126 pp.  
*Nordic Journal of Migration  
Research*, 13(1): 11,  
pp. 1–4. DOI: [https://doi.  
org/10.33134/njmr.672](https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.672)

provide a wealth of examples to illustrate their connections with the overarching theme and their specific relation to the Nordic context. The themes of the book examine are states and elites (Chapter 2); family, gender and sexuality (Chapter 3); migration and the outside view on the Nordic region (Chapter 4); conspiracy theories about the Nordic countries (Chapter 5) and a concluding chapter on Nordic noir (Chapter 6).

The book displays a wealth of interdisciplinary knowledge on the subject and weaves seamlessly between the various disciplines of the editors. Despite being a relatively short book, it manages to account for complex understandings of the social, political and historical conditions in which conspiracy theories are prevalent, and explores these conditions in several cases to illustrate the particulars of the Nordic genre of conspiracy theories.

Specifically, the book concerns itself with the resentment found in contemporary conspiracy theories. In Chapters 2 and 3, the editors show how conspiracies in Nordic countries often antagonize the new and strange, as it seeks to disturb often conservative and Christian values. This is exemplified by the terrorist attack in Norway in 2011. These chapters navigate several cases where immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, feminists or any kind of opposition are vilified. Not only by the infamous terrorist in his manifesto, but also by Nordic populist political parties that have become increasingly popular in recent history. The editors show succinctly how conspiracy rhetoric is present at every level of nationalist politics in the Nordic countries. This is further explored in other chapters in how conspiracy culture relates to the state in ideological inconsistent ways.

In Chapters 2 and 6, the authors argue a particular interesting point, which refers to the ideological inconsistency present in Nordic conspiracy theories. In Chapter 2, the editors describe how an incompetent governmental response to a traumatic event, like the murder of Olof Palme and the sinking of the MS Estonia, spark conspiracies of corrupt government rather than an incompetent one. This idea is further explored in the last chapter about comparing conspiracy theories with Nordic noir genre fiction.

The authors note:

In conspiracy culture we note that, paradoxically, an assumption of a functioning state is prevalent even among Nordic sovereign citizens, whose ideology presents the state as evil and its regulatory powers as utterly illegitimate. [...] In the same vein, conspiracy believers often call on the state to follow the “right procedures”. (p. 99)

This shows an interesting divergence compared to Nordic noir, which often contains a leftist critique of the state and capitalism, yet “there is often a stress on even the excessive following of rules, [...]” (p. 99). With conspiracy culture in recent years there is rather a focus on the illusive ‘other’ (as discussed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4), globalism and other far-right tenets.

This proposes an interesting notion of how contemporary conspiracy theories can work as coping narratives for the far-right to make sense of grievances in ways that would otherwise be ideologically unavailable to them. Further, this reframes the discussion on conspiracy theories from being distrustful of public institutions

to rather a betrayal of trust. Here, conspiracy culture is positioned to make sense of irrational outcomes from rational-presented systems like capitalism or a bureaucratic government. Conspiracy theories can then offer an explanation of (often tragic) events that puts the onus of evil into conspirators rather than the incompetency of the government and the rational authority it culturally represents in the Nordic countries.

Throughout the book, the authors ask whether the Nordic countries are exceptional in any regard concerning the local instances of conspiracy theories. The answer is no (p. 100). However, the regional history and culture partly shape how conspiracy theories are articulated. An example is how far-right culture uses conspiracy rhetoric to project their grievances onto minorities or other corruptive evils, which is present on a global scale, as is evident by the recent attempts of insurrections in the United States, Germany and Brazil.

Being a product of the interdisciplinary research collaboration on conspiracy theories, comparative analysis of conspiracy theories in Europe (COMPACT 2020), the book is firmly rooted in contemporary conspiracy theories studies and it manages to synthesize a lot of interdisciplinary theories on the subject into a coherent story about a region and its contextual politics. Further reading on subject can be found in similar books in the aforementioned Routledge series, which includes analysis of conspiracy theories in other regions and contexts.

As stated by the editors, the book is very much the first step in understanding the conspiracy theory phenomenon in a Nordic context. As such, it covers a large range of topics but without attempting to capture the comprehensive complexities of the region (p. 11). Instead, it provides many avenues that new research on conspiracy theories in the Nordic countries can take. For example, the book was mostly written before or during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, it cannot incorporate the massive expansion of conspiracy culture in recent years, which would be extremely interesting to add to the perspectives provided in this book. Specifically, the effect of social media in relation to conspiracy theories in Nordic countries and how this technology affects conspiracy culture would be an interesting avenue for further work. In all aspects, the book creates a great starting point to engage with conspiracies in the Nordic context.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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## REFERENCE

**COMPACT.** 2020. *Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories in Europe*. Available at <https://conspiracytheories.eu/> [Last accessed 13 January 2023].

**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Aarup, FG. 2023. Book review of Astapova, Anastasiya, Bergmann, Eirikur, Dyrendal, Asbjørn, Rabo, Annika, Grotle Rasmussen, Kasper, Thórisdóttir, Hulda and Önnersfors, Andreas 2021. *Conspiracy Theories and the Nordic Countries*. New York: Routledge, 126 pp. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 13(1): 11, pp. 1–4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.672>

**Submitted:** 24 January 2023

**Accepted:** 25 January 2023

**Published:** 30 March 2023

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