



<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Social Science's Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone

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Basham, Lee and Matthew R. X. Dentith "Social Science's Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5, no. 10 (2016): 12-19.

<http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3fi>

“Let us never tolerate outrageous conspiracy theories.” — United States
President George W. Bush, first national address following 9/11

Governments and corporations routinely conspire to deceive people. This is no startling revelation to anyone who is historically or politically literate. It’s also perfectly understandable; sometimes governments need to keep secret what they are up to *now* to realise some *future* benefit. On occasion businesses need to deny some claim *in order to investigate it more fully*. And, yes, sometimes it is because governments and corporations get up to no good. But if you believe a cadre of social psychologists, we’re not supposed to talk about any of this.

Witness the recent declaration published in *Le Monde* by a group of social scientists who research conspiracy theorizing.¹ In it they view a normal, even politically necessary, practice with horror. These researchers want to develop a *science* of how to *stop* the public from considering these things we call “conspiracy theories.”

And they want the public to pay them for it.

Why? Well, recently, the French Ministry of Education began a programme of educational initiatives designed to distinguish verifiable facts from various unprovable pieces of information, some of which are associated with the plethora of conspiracy theories which emerged in the wake of a series of terrorist incidents over the last few years. The *Le Monde* piece states:

The political reaction to the problem of the growth of conspiracy theories is not at all disproportionate, because it is essentially a major problem. However, the urgency of this reaction suggests undue haste, one which must give way to a reasoned political response that leans on solid scientific knowledge, and takes into account all the facts available.²

In effect, the declaration is a missive designed to chide the Ministry of Education for not being sufficiently scientific about its efforts at quashing conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorising. They ask for a reasoned response, and we—the undersigned of this reply—agree that a measured, cautious response to conspiracy theories is a must. However, the *Le Monde* declaration is neither measured, nor cautious. The authors focus not so much on the conspiracy theories themselves, or just how they might imperil the public, or even what evidence there is for or against them. It’s almost as if none of those questions really matter. What we *are* told by them is scientific techniques must be developed—and then deployed—so that people won’t even recognize conspiracy as an option. Their goal? That conspiracies can never (or at least hardly ever) be allowed to explain certain events (or any events) in Western society.

¹ Bronner, Campion-Vincent, Delouée, Dieguez, Douglas, Gauvrit, Lantian, and Wagner-Egger, “Luttons efficacement contre les théories du complot,” 29.

² Ibid.

Why? Well, because:

If...the government is suspected of active involvement in a conspiracy, its attempts at communication can...at worst increase suspicion. Taking the time for scientific research to reflect and analyze...avoids harmful [government actions aimed at stopping public conspiracy theorizing].³

Conspiracy theories are bad. Period. They are "...a problem that must be taken seriously." Not just *some* of them, *all* of them. These researchers give no attention to whether anti-government conspiracy theories might be well-evidenced. They give no respect to the danger real political conspiracy threatens the public with, and they make no acknowledgement that exposing conspiracies is a critical practice in a well-functioning democracy. After all, in an environment in which people take a dim view of conspiracy theories, conspiracies may multiply and prosper. Conversely, claims of conspiracy which are taken seriously, investigated by journalists, police, and the like, are much more likely to fail.

So, why do they take offence at the French prescription? Well, because "[t]he wrong cure might only serve to spread the disease... we believe it necessary to recall that current attempts to remedy the problem will only be, for the moment, an improvisation." The authors of the *Le Monde* declaration are not talking about replying to racist babbling. Rather, they're advocating disabling completely sensible questions about government conduct, and the various abuses of its covert powers.

Which is to say that they believe people shouldn't bother evaluating the evidence for or against, even though an evaluation of the evidence for or against really should be the end of the story. Rather, people are to be scientifically directed, somehow, to fixate on the cry of "That's a conspiracy theory!", flee the room, and not reflect on any facts.

Conspiracy theorising is apparently a problem in need of a cure. Yes, conspiracy theorists are diseased, with a curious social ailment. In the academic literature this is known as the "pathologizing response" to conspiracy explanations, and is no longer well received. Why? Well, because we all believe in some theory about a conspiracy. And these researchers aim to cure us of that.

That's dangerous. Contrary to these social scientists, we believe that it is not conspiracy theorizing that is the danger, but rather the pathologizing response to conspiracy theories.

The antidote to whatever problems conspiracy theories present is vigilance, not some faux intellectual sophistication which dismisses conspiracy theories out of hand. It's really quite simple when you think about it: conspiracy theorising is essential to the functioning of any democracy, or indeed any ethically responsible society.

First, consider the antithesis of democracy: Political tyranny. History shows there is a significant probability of political tyranny's development in any society which is not attentive to what its politicians are doing. The development or rapid advent of political tyranny typically begins and matures with conspiracies within the political leadership. As such, the

³ Ibid.

prevention of any potential political tyrant requires the public be able to question what is happening in their polity, and that suspicions of misdeeds be treated seriously and investigated. These are necessary precautions, and they should not be restricted just because asking such questions might cause embarrassment, or lead to distrust.

It's not just the emergence of extreme, overt tyranny we have to set a moral watch for. High-placed political conspiracies of lesser ambition often lie behind the political catastrophes of recent history. Very recent. For example, the catastrophe of the invasion of Iraq comes to mind. There is little doubt in the public or scholars that NATO, and many other governments, were intentionally misled and manipulated into this war, particularly by the U.S. government. This truth, well-evidenced at the time of grave decision, was silenced as an "outrageous conspiracy theory" by heads of state, mainstream media and yes, certain members of academia. Thus, a war that ultimately led to the death of hundreds of thousands, and a desperate global refugee crisis, was powerfully enabled by an anti-conspiracy theory panic. One that these scholars would seem to like to embrace and nurture as general policy.

We have to honestly ask: How many people have been killed by *well-evidenced* conspiracy theories? And how many have been killed by a *flippant rejection* of conspiracy theory? History holds the answer.

After all, these researchers ask we take into account all of the facts available. Well, the Holocaust began as a conspiracy. It had to. Prepared in secret councils of the Nazi party, the conspiracy culminated at the Wannsee conference of 1942. The contents of this conference were hardly broadcast to the world or its intended victims. They were hidden. The Nazis assured the world it was "relocating" Jews, even forcing family members already in the extermination facilities to write letters to their relatives in "ghettos" (often rural camps) encouraging them to get on the trains, as life, they were forced to write, was so much better at the extermination facilities. When Reich officials were challenged about their intentions and actions, they argued anything more sinister than relocation was an outrageous conspiracy theory. The same was said of Stalin's murderous Show Trials—an outrageous conspiracy theory, and the denials of a North Vietnamese attack on the US in the Gulf of Tonkin—yet another outrageous conspiracy theory which happens to be warranted on the then available evidence. And need we point towards the words and deeds of people like Nixon, Bush, or Blair?

There was nothing outrageous *at the time* about any of these conspiracy theories. All of were well-evidenced and *all were proved true*. So we ask: How many more real outrages have slipped through the silence caused by conspiracy-denial? While some social scientists, with the best of intentions (we do not question these) may wish to combat conspiracy theories they dislike, we all should agree that the lesson of history is conspiracy theorizing is often necessary.

Only a thoughtful attention to conspiracy theory, on the *merits of evidence*, can meet the threat such conspiracies present. Evidence is the key. Nothing else suffices. Poorly evidenced conspiracy theories will be quickly set aside. But well-evidenced conspiracy theories will be

pursued without censor.

Every mode of explanation can be abused. And every attempt at censorship, too. The German National Socialists generated absurd conspiracy theories about Jews in Europe. Cruel elements of the various Christian denominations had long done the same (as have various groups afterwards; Stalinists, the Social Credit movement, etc.). The lies were embraced, letting the murderous nightmare of the Holocaust to proceed. These fictions should have been met with facts, but when rational, evidential considerations are not allowed to be heard, reason can not prevail. This is why we should focus, always, on the facts. We cannot resort to conspiracy denialism. We all know where that road goes. Ask the people of Iraq. Ask the people of Syria.

After all, we were assured the US NSA is a law-abiding organization that would spy neither on US citizens nor trusted NATO allies. To question that (and some did with good reason) was dismissed as conspiracy theory. But the NSA did all this (and may still do so). Examples of this kind of behavior are legion. Take, for example, the remarkable death of prominent Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko, who was assassinated with Polonium. Who did it? Russian government agents? By his fellow dissidents, in order to embarrass the Russian government? Any reasonable explanation of his death turns out to be a conspiracy theory. The question is which one is warranted. Should we pay for a science that teaches us not to understand this?

Much contemporary media, most political leaders and some social scientists insist that “conspiracy theory” must mean something automatically false or irrational. Yet our historians show it does not and never did. The pejorative use of “conspiracy theory” is a use of mere convenience. The official account of 9/11 is, after all, a conspiracy theory: the hijackers conspired to fly airplanes into buildings in New York City, Washington, and elsewhere. That’s a conspiracy theory. Was it called that? Not by mainstream media, or most political leaders. But it was, just the same. Any pejorative use of “conspiracy theory” is intellectually suspect, as is its convenient absence when governmental institutions use conspiracy theories to promote their goals. We are facing a phrase of social manipulation, one which some academics wish to portray and empower in a way so that it cannot impugn our hierarchies of power, but only defend them. The only conspiracy theories permitted will be official conspiracy theories. They will not be called “conspiracy theories.” But their explanatory method will be indistinguishable.

There is nothing unusual or inherently defective about conspiracy explanations. We should *always, without exception, adopt a case-by-case, evidential evaluation of all allegations of politically momentous conspiracy*. These should never be simply dismissed and silenced. The anti-conspiracy theory panic, and the automatic dismissal it reveals, rests at the foundation of the declaration by these social scientists. It is not only anti-rational and non-historical it is unethical and foolish. This panic can only help repeat the many criminal errors of our democracies.

Political conspiracy theorizing in Western-style democracies should not be restricted, because to do so is a grave intellectual, ethical, and prudential error. As such, the declaration by respected scholars like these is likewise a grave intellectual, ethical and prudential error.

Conspiracy theory saves lives, by the thousands, even millions, if we would let it. Its automatic dismissal leaves blood on our hands.

Fortunately for the public and our democracy, the more you tell the public not to think in ways open to all possibilities, including the real possibility of political and economic conspiracies, the more likely the public is to do it and more often do it. Call this an “open society.” Some social scientists are bothered by this and seek a scientific “remedy?” So be it, and our regrets that this would become the cornerstone of their careers. But we take great comfort in the open society. If research into public concerns about government need be, it should be in ways that encourage the people’s politically crucial gift, the historically proven gift of watchfulness in the citizen, and its sometimes necessary, proper and correct expression, *conspiracy theory*.

Sincerely,

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Bios

Matthew R. X. Dentith wrote his PhD on the epistemology of conspiracy theories, is the author of the book *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), and is currently a Fellow at the University of Bucharest, working on his project “The Ethics of Investigation: When are we obliged to take conspiracy theories seriously?”

Lee Basham is a professor of Philosophy at South Texas College and the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, and has published several articles on the epistemology of conspiracy theory.

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Ginna Husting is a professor of Sociology at Boise State University whose research and publications include the sociology of “conspiracy theory” as a term of exclusion and control.

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Kurtis Hagen is a professor of Philosophy, recently retired from the State University of New York (SUNY), who has published several articles on the epistemology of conspiracy theory, as well as many on Asian philosophy.

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Below is the *Le Monde* statement (English translation) we are responding to:

Let's fight conspiracy theories effectively

The Ministry of Education must test its pedagogical tools against conspiracy culture. The wrong cure might only serve to spread the disease.

Conspiracy theories are on many people's minds and are the object of all kinds of initiatives, sometimes local, sometimes more ambitious. The French government is among them, evidenced by the collaboration between the Ministry of Education and France Télévisions to produce and diffuse a 'video-kit', available to all in the teaching profession (<https://vimeo.com/151519913>). They also explore suitable responses to the worrying spread of these 'theories' by proposing, here and there, an intellectual defence or critical response. Ultimately, these associations come together to fight against this particular form of contemporary misinformation known as 'conspiracism'.

As researchers and citizens concerned with the multiplication and dissemination of false information, errors in reason, even deliberate lies in a democracy that we would like to be more rigorous and rational, we welcome these steps and applaud the good intentions they represent. Conspiracism is indeed a problem that must be taken seriously, one which requires a proper response, and all the more quickly as it is on the rise, particularly in France these past few years.

The political reaction to the problem of the growth of conspiracy theories is not at all disproportionate, because it is essentially a major problem. However, the urgency of this reaction suggests undue haste, one which must give way to a reasoned political response that leans on solid scientific knowledge, and takes into account all of the facts available. One can question, for example, the scope and efficaciousness of the videos disseminated widely by the Ministry of Education: their effect, due to a lack of rigorous testing, is completely unknown. The laudable intention behind the creation of these films does not guarantee their effectiveness.

Boomerang effect

As a result, these tools, like many other educational initiatives, may turn out to be ineffective. Even worse, research in social psychology has shown that the fight against a belief can, paradoxically, serve to reinforce it by a 'boomerang effect', a phenomenon widely

documented in studies of rumour and misinformation. It is therefore entirely possible that the actions of ministers and associations result in an effect that is the opposite of that desired for the target audience: a polarisation of beliefs and a growth in the conspiracist mindset. The communication's source is not insignificant when viewed through a conspiratorial lens. If, for example, the government is suspected of active involvement in a conspiracy, its attempts at communication can, at best, be ineffective, and, at worst, increase suspicion.

Taking the time for scientific research, to reflect and to analyse before taking action, will often save time in the long run. It also avoids taking part in harmful activity. Drugs are not launched without rigorous testing; in the same way it is risky to launch educational recommendations without basing them on solid results and prior investigations. A responsible policy begins with research and takes into account the information already available. Furthermore, these more or less random campaigns are expensive, and this investment is automatically taken from more methodical studies of the phenomenon. It is therefore urgent that we launch widespread research programmes aimed at evaluating present educational initiatives rather than continuing to promote them.

‘Confirmation bias’

Unanswered questions are still very common in conspiratorial thinking. Why is the hypercritical attitude of these adepts not extended to their own beliefs? This “confirmation bias”, which consists of favouring that which confirms our opinions and rejecting that which contradicts it, is well known, but has not yet been examined in the field of conspiracy theories. What is the role of the creative, entertaining component of these ‘theories’, which are often so imaginative? And must one distinguish between those who produce conspiracy theories and those who consume them?

To answer these questions is not simply to make advances towards the disengagement and suspicion that characterises conspiracism, but also to make progress in our understanding of belief mechanisms, social exchanges and ideological creativity.

Research into the psychological and social factors underlying the adherence to conspiracy theories is only the beginning. In the absence of solid scientific consensus on the question, we believe it necessary to recall that current attempts to remedy the problem will only be, for the moment, an improvisation.

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Le Monde, 6 June 2016, p. 29