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An Interdisciplinary Drama: Conspiracist Philosophers versus Conspiring Social Scientists?

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In the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* (SERRC), a debate has taken place since November 2016 on one of the hottest and most complex topics to hit contemporary news: conspiracy theories.

If only a few scholars had dealt with it since the mid-20th century, the exponential spread of such theories in the new millennium throughout the world, and especially in the Western democracies, has certainly prompted many disciplines to take it up. What had seemed easy enough to thinkers such as Karl Popper or Richard Hofstadter to elucidate, now reveals itself as an enigmatic nature that is so crowded with different aspects that it cannot be approached from a single perspective: it emerges as an interdisciplinary topic par excellence. The debate in this journal has had the merit of unveiling some of the pitfalls that the relationship between disciplines in this field hides.¹

Let us see the plot from the beginning.

Prologue

In an article that appeared on 6 June 2016 in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, ‘Luttons Efficacement Contre Les Théories Du Complot’, a group of both French- and English-speaking psychologists and sociologists warned the public of the danger of conspiracy theories and examined the effectiveness of initiatives to combat them.² The verdict on this ‘particular form of contemporary disinformation also known as *conspiracy theories*’ is unqualified: it is a danger to the normal functioning of democracy.

Act I

The following 18 October, in the SERRC, Lee Basham and Matthew R.X. Dentith, together with a group of social epistemologists, plus two sociologists and a psychologist,³ published a critique of *Le Monde*’s article. The short paper, entitled “Social Science’s Conspiracy Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone”, attacks the view of the social scientists, as *Le Monde*’s group would be called from then on, as being *generalist* and *pathologising* towards conspiracy theories.

¹ This text is a development of my article, ‘Teorie del Complotto: Cospirazionisti Contro Cospiratori’, published in the journal *LMDP: The Wonder of the Possible*, No. 4, March 2023, Luiss University Press.

² Team of the 2016 *Le Monde* article: Gérald Bronner, sociologist, Université Paris Diderot; Véronique Champion-Vincent, sociologist, Maison des Sciences de l’Homme; Sylvain Delouée, social psychologist, Université de Rennes 2; Sebastian Dieguez, neuropsychologist, Université de Fribourg; Karen Douglas, social psychologist, University of Kent; Nicolas Gauvrit, cognitive psychologist, Université de Lille; Anthony Lantian, psychologist, Université Paris Nanterre; Pascal Wagner-Egger, social psychologist, Université de Fribourg.

³ Team of the 2016 SERRC article: Lee Basham, professor of philosophy, South Texas College; Matthew R.X. Dentith, epistemologist, Beijing Normal University; David Coady, professor of philosophy, University of Tasmania; Ginna Husting, professor of sociology, Boise State University; Martin Orr, professor of sociology, Boise State University; Kurtis Hagen, former professor of philosophy, SUNY Plattsburgh; Marius Raab, psychologist, Universität Bamberg.

Thus began a game of opposing articles that mostly found a home in the SERRC journal from 2016 to 2019: the two teams—the Anglo-Saxon and the French-speaking majority—took turns exchanging opposing arguments and not too covert accusations of conspiracy on the one hand or conspiracism on the other.

The article signed by Basham and Dentith, from which the controversy started, had an alarmed and almost accusatory tone; moreover, it also broke some of the golden rules of academic norm: for instance, instead of mentioning the team with the name of the first signatory followed by the year of publication, it simply referred to it with the pronoun ‘they’.

The alarm stemmed from two concerns: a theoretical concern, the defence of the legitimacy of all Conspiracy Theories, and a political concern, the defence of the denunciation of conspiracies, considered fundamental to democratic life and the Open Society. The paper started from the evidence of the existence of conspiracies for all those who are historically and politically literate, so any conspiracy theory would be legitimate. Basham, Dentith and their colleagues pointed out how the team in the *Le Monde* article instead regarded these *theories* as a *disease* in need of appropriate *treatment*.

They also warned repeatedly about the pejorative use that the term *conspiracy theory* had taken on in everyday language. For Basham, Dentith and their colleagues this use was not innocent, it had a specific purpose and a culprit: “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” (15).

The spectrum of issues that the two sides touch upon in the controversy is very broad; some of the most important are the pathological or non-pathological character of conspiracy theories and the problem of how these should be judged, whether en bloc or case by case or, as epistemologists say, in a *generalist* or *particularist* manner. For reasons of expediency and space, I will deal mainly with the problem inherent in the definition of *conspiracy theory*, the issue from which the above-mentioned are derived.

At first, the two teams seem to agree on at least two points. In the third article of the controversy, “‘They’ Respond: Comments on Basham et al.’s ‘Social Science’s Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone’” published in SERRC on 28 December 2016, first signatory Sebastian Dieguez, the social scientists indicate that for the understanding of the whole issue there is a need for the definition of *conspiracy theory*. Secondly, they state that they agree that it is not good to refer such *theories* only to unjustified conspiracies. After that, they come even closer to the theses of the Anglo-Saxon team by agreeing that: “Adjusting the concept of conspiracy theory to its use in common parlance, whatever that is, is not convenient and somewhat tautological” (22).

As will be seen, the other team does not seem to register the concordances put forward by Dieguez’s group, and will only focus on the points of disagreement from here on. One of the subjects of contention is the breadth of the definition to be used; shortly before the dispute began, Dentith, immediately supported by Basham, had stated that the only right way to proceed was to use the widest possible class, i.e. to adopt a *minimum* definition (Dentith 2016; Basham 2016):

A ‘conspiracy’ is where two or more persons intentionally cooperate to deceive others. Conspiracy theories are causal explanations. So a conspiracy theory is any explanation of events that includes a conspiracy as a salient cause. Dentith’s case for adopting this analytic definition, one unclouded by sociological or epistemic addendum, appears convincing (Basham 2016, 6–7).

This reasoning leaves the social scientists cold, who see Dentith’s definition as totally simplistic and premature. For Dieguez and his colleagues, a definition must immediately take into account why some people are inclined to approve, produce or spread conspiracy ideas, while others are not, and must also consider the fact that they are “a large set of individuals who ‘theorise’ about conspiracies with a complete disregard for the evidence” (Dieguez et al. 2016, 29). The procedure that is indicated as appropriate is an empirical method, as opposed to the conceptual method, the ‘armchair venting’ of the epistemologists (22). However, the social scientists propose an initial definition, not yet an actual *operational definition*: ‘a “conspiracy theory” is what the conspiracist mindset tends to produce and be attracted to, an apparently circular definition that rests on ongoing work’ (30).

On the antagonists’ side, there will be more answers on this issue. Dentith, in the 2018 collection he edited, *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, points out that it is impossible ‘to understand what constitutes belief in a thing (say a conspiracy theory) if we are not yet sure what that thing is’. Together with Basham, in Chapter Six of the same collection, he points out that:

The definition is not just ‘apparently’ circular, it is obviously so, as soon as we ask what is referred to by ‘conspiracist’. This will include at least the idea of “conspiracy theory,” which is the very notion to be defined. Elementary logic: One cannot rely on the very term to be defined in its definition (87).

The collection will be followed by a response from the social scientists, first signatory Wagner-Egger (2019), and two rebuttals, one by Dentith (2019) and one by Basham (2019), which will only add to the discord.

Act II

On 5 July 2022, after three years of silence, a scholar from another philosophical field, but with a strong interest in the subject, decided to intervene in defence of the social scientists. His name is Scott Hill, he works at the Institute of Christian Philosophy at the University of Innsbruck, and his article published, also in SERRC, is entitled “A Defence of the *Le Monde* Group”.⁴ This was followed by seven more articles, reciprocal responses of one to the other.

⁴ He published a second version on 9 August, 2022b, “A Revised Defense of the *Le Monde* Group.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (8): 18–26, with a more articulate conclusion.

Hill's opening point is simple and clear: the social scientists in the *Le Monde* article were rightly taking issue with stereotypical conspiracy theories, i.e. those of an oversimplified or prejudiced nature; that is why they never expressed 'a total rejection of any belief in any proposition with a conspiracy as part of its content' (Hill 2022a, 2), such as the Holocaust; hence the accusation of endorsing or planning a brainwashing by the French state on its citizens does not stand. Philosophers have failed to understand the real intention of social scientists: to limit stupid and stereotypical *theories* and prevent the errors of conspiracy thinking. In conclusion, Hill claims the validity of the pejorative definition of common language *theory*: the conclusion could not be further from the assumptions of social epistemologists.

Dentith's first reply (2022), dated 15 August, and Hill's prompt response (2022c), dated 31 August, immediately show a different tone from that of the original controversy: there are no accusations of hidden agendas, dogmatism or impropriety, but rather a certain politeness, and even a gradual rethinking of the issues by both. Dentith admits that they and their colleagues were too hasty in responding to the definition proposed by the social scientists because the inclusion of the *circular definition* had aroused their fears of the distortions this construct adds to reasoning.

As far as Hill is concerned, Dentith reiterates the cardinal principle of social epistemologists going back to Willard V.O. Quine: the problem with all labels in everyday language is that, if you do not already have a definition of them, you do not know what they allow you to identify and measure, and this is what happens with the term *stereotypical conspiracy theories* as well (42).

Dentith then moves on to the aspect that for Hill characterises *stereotypical theories*, namely their 'blatant stupidity and falsity'. They admit that there may be suspect *theories* that seem 'highly improbable', but at the same time refers to a famous statement by Brian L. Keeley (2007) to the effect that 'there is no hallmark of the unbelievable' that allows us to tell at a glance which *theories* are justified and which are unjustified (43). As Dentith would later write, "There is only a *set of* 'unwarranted' conspiracy theories; namely those we already know exist and that are, for various reasons, found to be evidently wanting" (Duetz and Dentith 2022, 44–45).

Hill (2022c) responds by observing that he sees no substantial difference between Dentith's 'very, very unlikely' and his 'stupid and false', so it can be said that social scientists wanted to help people understand that *theories* can be 'very, very unlikely' (94). Hill then addresses the issue he considers to be the main one, the need for a definition of the *conspiracy theory* label: for him, the work of social scientists can proceed without it. Defining is useful but not necessary, so it does not matter even if one proceeds from a *circular definition*". Hill thinks it is enough to take 'the relevant collection of stereotypes, look at people who believe them, contrast them with people who do not, and then see whether any interesting correlations with believing members of that collection emerge' (98).

In the further response to Hill, a significant change already appears in the choice of positioning Julia C.M. Duetz as the first signatory before Dentith.

This article, which came out in SERRC on 27 October 2022, has the emblematic title ‘Reconciling Conceptual Confusions in the *Le Monde* Debate on Conspiracy Theories’; in the very first lines, it refers to a topic that has been completely ignored so far, the fundamental importance of the interdisciplinary approach for contemporary research and, in particular, for *conspiracy theory theory* (as Dentith has renamed conspiracy theory studies). The speech begins by admitting that everyone in the debate in *Le Monde*, past and present protagonists:

Instead, we resorted to blatant trash-talking, denigrating other fields’ methods, and belittling other scholars’ grasp of the phenomenon (which will not be included in the analysis of the dispute below). This unproductive and spiteful feature of the interdisciplinarity of Conspiracy Theory Theory should have ended there. Instead, we face it again when, really, we should be in the business of reconciliation (40).

For the two early-career scholars, the Commentators, as Dentith, Basham and the rest of the team would henceforth be called, had from the outset misunderstood the position on the problematic nature of all the *theories* of the Instigators, the social scientists so called because they were initiators of the debate.

Having said this, the two epistemologists question whether, within the new common field of *conspiracy theory theory*, epistemologists and social scientists are actually dealing with the same things. Duetz answered this question in his paper published on 10 September 2022, ‘Conspiracy Theories are Not Beliefs’. The distinction between *beliefs* and *theories* makes it possible to resolve the conceptual confusions of the controversy. On this basis, it is possible to separate the objects of research: the Commentators deal with *theory* and *theorising*, which should not be stigmatised negatively as the Instigators had done. This reaffirms the democratic practice of unmasking conspiracies; moreover, this way of understanding defends individual *theories* from any pejorative labels and implies that they are verified on a case-by-case basis.

The distinction between beliefs and theories illuminates what the Instigators actually mean when they claim to want to effectively combat *theories*, innocently denouncing that they are not interested in them, but in *conspiracy beliefs*: they want, in fact, to investigate the psychological mechanisms underlying belief in such *theories* (42).

On the problem of definition, Duetz and Dentith find that there was no complete disagreement since Dieguez and others admitted that the definition of *conspiracy theory* did not only refer to unjustified conspiracy *theories*. The fact that Dieguez and his never accepted the epistemologists’ minimal definition, but focused on the *conspiracist mentality*, underlines how they were “merely interested in the psychology of all this” (42) and not in the “evidential merits of conspiracy theories”. In short, in the domain of *conspiracy theory theory* the Instigators ‘are concerned with *conspiracy belief*, *conspiracy (or conspiracist) mindset*, and *conspiracy theorists*’ (43).

Duetz and Dentith have thus reached a very high point in the discussion: they have sorted out the different competences and objects among the various disciplines dealing with *conspiracy theory theory*, but they also evidently see another goal. They courageously bring the

discussion to something that was never accepted by the commentators in the first part of the debate: the existence of people who believe *conspiracy theories* more than others.

In order to find an explanation for this, the two scholars first introduce *situational factors*, i.e. those factors that depend on the context, such as geographical area, era, culture, etc., and which, when they are irrelevant, leave the explanation to *dispositional factors*, such as the psychological mechanisms underlying the *conspiracist mentality*. After ruling out situational factors in a given context, individuals who believe multiple beliefs, and these same beliefs believed only by them, are a legitimate object for researchers, such as Instigators, in order to ascertain whether the aforementioned individuals share certain cognitive characteristics that explain their deviant beliefs. Thus: ‘After all, it seems we can grant that there is a class of beliefs (not theories) which might be epistemically suspect’ (47).

The reconciliation, however, does not concern Hill’s claims, as the latter on stereotypical *theories* continues to confuse *theories* and *beliefs* and continues to validate the common meaning of *theories*: Hill in fact backtracks on the concordances between the two teams.

In any case, Hill’s resumption of the debate was useful, because:

The goal of this response has been to untangle this conceptual confusion, and through that reconcile parts of the *Le Monde* debate to a point where interdisciplinary research projects in Conspiracy Theory are stimulated, rather than obstructed (49).

Act III

Lee Basham also intervened in this new discussion. On 28 September 2022, he published his contribution entitled ‘Hill on “Stereotypical” Conspiracy Theories and Cognitive Disabling’ in SERRC. Basham considers Hill’s restrictive interpretation of the *Le Monde* team’s condemnation of only ‘stereotypical conspiracy theories’, i.e. based on preconceptions, to be wrong: the text sees the American epistemologist standing absolutely firm on his convictions in the controversy. For Basham, social scientists have understood *theories in general* to pursue a generalist project of political pathologisation and promote a technique of reducing critical thinking for young people. There is therefore no misunderstanding (64).

In any case, the stereotyped ‘Theories’ are, as Hill himself says, not only stupid, but also patently false, so that for Basham they would be part of the unjustified ‘Theories’, and thus need no further definition; moreover, they are ‘Theories’ that hardly anyone believes in. However, it is unclear who and on what basis they are so defined and thus condemned, before there is any evidence for or against them.

Basham states his political perspective, which is closely united with the epistemological one:

Find a government, you find a conspiracy. This should be a given among the historically literate. A number of philosophers have defended this position and it has become widely understood as the proper measure of caution in a functional democracy (Basham 2022a, 65).

Only the *particularist view* allows this focus to be maintained. Researchers who support a *generalist* view of pathologisation, such as the social scientists of *Le Monde* or Stuart Hill, are often financed by government institutions that wish to restrict critical thinking (72). A functional democracy needs suspicion and anyone who wants to ‘stigmatise’ it is undemocratic.

On 11 November 2022, Hill published a final response to each of the scholars who intervened in this second phase of the debate: ‘Substantive Disagreement in the *Le Monde* Debate and Beyond: Replies to Duetz and Dentith, Basham, and Hewitt’.

The first and most conspicuous part is devoted to the article by Duetz and Dentith; the scholar states that their contribution about conspiracy beliefs and the conspiracy mentality has changed his perspective, causing him to ask new questions about the way ordinary people understand conspiracy theories. From this point of view, he believes—unlike Duetz and Dentith—that philosophers and scientists use the term ‘Conspiracy Theory’ in the same way, i.e. that the term designates the same object for both groups of scholars and not different objects, and that this meaning coincides with the ordinary meaning. So, there is no misunderstanding, but all the contrasts he noted arise from very different ideas about the nature of conspiracy theories, and in particular: ‘What do ordinary people call to mind when they think of conspiracy theories?’” (Hill 2022d, 21).

This central disagreement, on which Hill pivots almost all the issues he raises, is that the meaning of the term that ordinary people understand by ‘Conspiracy Theory’ is not in a broad sense, i.e. it does not include any ‘Theory’, whether justified or not, but in a narrow sense, i.e. it only covers the stereotyped, unjustified ones. At this point, all the fears of the two philosophers are unfounded or exaggerated.

His endorsement of Duetz’s and Dentith’s claims is further thinned out when, in suggesting to them the extension of conspiracism to certain ‘Conspiracy Theories’, he fails to show that for the two philosophers only a part of the ‘Convictions of Conspiracy’ can be conspiracist, never the ‘Theories’.

Hill then goes on to respond to Basham; he first rejects Basham’s accusations of being part of an ‘EU funded’ ‘suppression programme’ to ‘dehumanise’, ‘cognitively disable’, and ‘de-rationalise persons’ (22). Then Hill only considers the point he has already dealt with previously, namely whether the *Le Monde* group meant ‘theories’ in a narrow or a broad sense. Basham had advanced the argument that the absence of restrictions on the term proves that the authors meant the meaning in general; in rebuttal, Hill responds with an example whereby the meaning of a sentence depends on the context rather than on the specification: if I say ‘that there is no more beer’, it does not mean that there is no more beer ‘there’, but that there is no more here.

It does not end there, on 5 December 2022 Basham re-enters the debate with an article entitled ‘Response to Hill: Conspiracy Theorising, Ordinary Usage and Integrity’; new arguments are advanced to reiterate the initial point, namely that the article in *Le Monde* was generalist and pathologising. The only change of direction is seen with regard to Hill: his

interpretation of the debate, although accused of ‘revisionism’, is welcome: ‘It’s an enjoyable and thoughtful piece with a high spirit to it’; moreover, according to Basham, by revitalising the debate, Hill is further aiding the realisation of the defectiveness of the pathologising approach to which *Le Monde*’s statement gave rise (Basham 2022b, 10).

The newest part, put forward by Basham, is the focus on the point that Hill always comes back to, namely that people are clear about what ‘Conspiracy Theory’ means and that this meaning is narrow, so that philosophers’ arguments about its definition are useless and exaggerated. Basham argues that “Hill’s mistake appears to be that reference exhausts meaning” (11), and therefore, underestimates the importance of the right definitions and the danger of the wrong ones.

However, Basham acknowledges Hill’s understanding that philosophers and social scientists follow the same meaning of ‘theories’ and that this coincides with the ‘ordinary’ meaning. Now for Basham, the ‘fortunate’ coincidence is that this ‘ordinary’ meaning, and the one given by the two disciplines involved, is that of ‘explanation’ (13); and this disproves Hill’s interpretation since this means that this ‘ordinary’ meaning is broad and not restricted to ‘Stereotypical Theories’ alone.

Duetz and Dentith’s distinction between ‘Theories’ and ‘Convictions’ is not commented on by Basham, the only positive reference being to a statement they make concerning the way in which scholars who pathologise ‘Theories’ regard those who suspect conspiracies: they are referred to as ‘unusual, cognitively and morally defective, whereas they are by far the majority’.

Epilogue

We see the point of all this drama.

As Duetz says in their first article (2022):

Firstly, one important kind of contribution a philosopher could make to a multidisciplinary research field like that of conspiracy theories is conceptual clarity. Traditionally, the art of conceptual analysis has been mastered in philosophy and so part of the relevance of philosophy for other disciplines lies in advanced understanding of the concepts at play.

This is precisely what happened in the SEERC debate: Basham’s and Dentith’s own correct initial remarks made clear the importance of the identification of a definition, its ‘minimal’ character, the meaning of ‘explanation’ of the term ‘Theory’ in the context of ‘conspiracy’, and the particularistic method that follows.

As we have seen with the resumption of the debate due to Scott Hill, the tone and progress of the discussion changed radically. In addition to a correct way of addressing scholars, there was a real focus on what the different researchers were saying in acknowledging concordances when these were detected. Much of the new attitude in this phase, I believe, is due to Dentith, who early on identified the misunderstandings that had been created in the first phase. Apart from the necessary *savoir-faire* introduced, I think Dentith realised that the

issue had to be taken beyond the point reached in the first *rounds*. And in fact, together with Duetz, they found the pivot of the communication gap that had been created on both sides; the two scholars resolved it by advancing the analysis, with the distinction between *theories* and *beliefs*. It seems to me, however, that so far this fundamental distinction has not had an effect commensurate with its importance. It also shows that one cannot proceed constructively while ignoring an inter- or multi- disciplinary approach.⁵

Hill's contribution is not insignificant. Besides providing an opportunity for a rethink at the right temporal distance, let us say 'with a cool head', it has raised an important issue for the attention of other scholars: what is actually the ordinary meaning of 'Conspiracy Theories'?

For the rest, Hill's semiotic position deprives social epistemology of the interdisciplinary contribution of its conceptual analysis. By neglecting such an analysis, it might be missed that the social scientists in *Le Monde's* statement failed to realise the theoretical consequences in adopting, without declaring it, the narrow meaning of 'stereotypical theories' (the pejorative formulation), which I believe is not so much of 'ordinary people' but of the mass media. In this, *Le Monde's* statement shows a theoretical superficiality that was rightly to be stigmatised, as did the philosophers, since in reality it was no longer clear what the social scientists were referring to.

To Basham, moreover, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of having highlighted one of the most important 'objects' of social epistemology: the study of the dominant source of knowledge in a society (Basham 2022a, 64) and, I would add, the study of reactions to the dominant knowledge itself. These topics are also central to the sociology of knowledge, an area of my interests.

On this basis, one can proceed from Duetz and Dentith's conclusions towards a sociological deepening of their argument: in a forthcoming paper, I will try to show that what may appear to be a generalised conspiracist of dispositional origin is instead produced by a widespread situational factor, especially in western democracies. The phenomenon is caused in whole or in part by the crisis that has arisen within the social process of knowledge transmission, which—to quote Basham—also has a political aspect, but which finds its deepest explanation in the rejection of the dominant source of knowledge in our society.

This situation is what underlies what has been called the Crisis of Epistemic Authorities or the Crisis of Competence.⁶

⁵ The majority of other researchers in the field of *conspiracy theory* have, in fact, proceeded differently from the protagonists of the controversy, obtaining valuable results: see the multidisciplinary collection edited by Joseph E. Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, New York, 2018. The 2019 collected article, with contributions from a number of prestigious scholars from different fields, entitled "Understanding Conspiracy Theories", *Political Psychology* 40 (S1): 2019, 3–35, first authored by social psychologist Karen Douglas, who had joined the initial paper that appeared in *Le Monde*, but who, subsequently, had not participated in the social scientists' articles. See also the very dense 2020 *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight.

⁶ See my article 'La Crisi Della Autorevolezza Degli Esperti' in *Prometheus* no. 150.

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