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Avoiding the Stereotyping of the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories: A Reply to Hill

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<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-74c>.

Scott Hill has recently challenged philosophers like myself, Lee Basham, and the other signatories of our 2016, for both our criticisms of an article by some social scientists which appeared in *Le Monde* back in 2016, and for supposedly and unproductively pushing the line:

So you think the stereotypical examples of conspiracy theories are bad? Well guess what? That means you have to think that any belief that any conspiracy ever occurred is bad (2022, 25).

I'm going to push back on Hill's criticism in four ways. First: we need some context for the debate that occurred in the pages of the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* that so concerns Hill. Second: getting precise with our terminology (and not working with stereotypes) is the *only* theoretically fruitful way to approach the problem of conspiracy theories. Third: I address Hill's claim there is no evidence George W. Bush or Tony Blair accused their critics, during the build-up the invasion of Iraq in 2003ACE, as being "conspiracy theorists." Fourth (and finally): I will gently suggest that Hill has succumbed to a stereotypical view of work in Philosophy on conspiracy theories.

I do this in the spirit of good humour: my worry is that Hill has inadvertently succumbed to stereotypes about the philosophical work in conspiracy theory theory, and his reply, unfortunately, furthers such stereotypes rather than advances our understanding of conspiracy theories more generally.

### **The *Le Monde* Debate**

Hill uses as the launching point for his criticism a debate that occurred here in the journal of the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* between *some* of the authors of what came to be known as the "*Le Monde* Declaration" (Bronner et al. 2016) and *some* of the philosophers, sociologists and psychologists working on conspiracy theory theory.<sup>1</sup>

Hill wants to defend the *Le Monde* authors. However, I worry that Hill doesn't capture what that debate was about: the original declaration concerned the authors worry that the French Government's education-led response to conspiracy theories in the wild was not supported by good social scientific work. Hill gives the impression that the *Le Monde* authors were for the French Government's response, whilst we "Philosophers" were not.

Rather, the *Le Monde* authors were concerned that the educational response being pushed in French schools was *improvised*, and really needed a better social scientific standing. As one of the authors of the reply to that original declaration, I agree: we need a better understanding of conspiracy theories before we start, to use a pathologising term, "inoculating" people against them. It is just that philosophers, sociologists and psychologists (since the reply Hill attributes to "Philosophers" represents a broader church when you look at who signed it) have qualms about *some* of the social science work in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> This debate is summarized and contextualized in greater detail in my edited collection (2018b).

## Why Getting Precise with Definitions is Important

Hill tells us that the *Le Monde* authors were primarily concerned with conspiracy theories around the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks of 2015. These examples are not in the original declaration: they were illustrative examples which appeared in the *reply* to our first reply to that original declaration (Dieguez et al., 2016). It is, then, useful, to see how the authors of that reply (a subset of the authors of the original declaration) define “conspiracy theory”:

For the time being, thus, a “conspiracy theory” is what the conspiracist mindset tends to produce and be attracted to, an apparently circular definition that rests on ongoing work but is firmly grounded in relevant research fields such as cognitive epidemiology, niche construction and cognitively driven cultural studies, and could be refined or refuted depending on future results (2016, 30).

Now, maybe we philosophers, sociologists and psychologists were too fast to criticise the original declaration, but it was because we were worried it was based upon, as we soon discovered, a circular definition, a definition philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists have been worried skews the academic debate. Indeed, many of our replies to this reply pointed this out (see: Hagen (2017); Basham (2017); Dentith and Orr (2018); and Basham (2019)).

Hill argues that as the *Le Monde* authors were obviously only interested with *stereotypical* conspiracy theories, the “Philosophers” are missing the point. Yet this is not obvious at all: the *obvious* problem with these “stereotypical” conspiracy theories is a feature of how they have been *labeled* rather than a feature of their content.

Think of Quine’s *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* and the underdetermination of theory by the evidence (1951). Sure, you can go out into the world and ask people “Is this a conspiracy theory? And is this a conspiracy theory? And what about this?” and generate something close to a cluster definition. But common use definitions turn out to be problematic if we don’t already have a concept of what a conspiracy theory is operating at the point we go around *labelling* things as “conspiracy theories.” That’s the worry: if the common use of the label “conspiracy theory” (the stereotypical conspiracy theories Hill is talking about) is conceptually confused as to what it refers to, then it is not clear what, if anything, such social scientists are studying.<sup>2</sup>

In several places Hill also claims that the *stereotypical* conspiracy theories the *Le Monde* authors are interested are:

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<sup>2</sup> For a tantalising look at how conceptually confused the *label* conspiracy theory might turn out to be if we work with ordinary language definitions, see Napolitano & Reuter (2021); for work critical of their proposed solution to this, see Shields (2022) and Deutz (forthcoming).

[O]bviously stupid. They are clearly false. The idea that the Jews were behind the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting is stupid. The idea that it was a false flag operation is stupid (2022, 20).

and:

Those particular stereotypes are stupid. Those particular conspiracy theories that arose in reaction to the relevant shootings are stupid. You can think that those stereotypes should be dismissed without thinking that no one should ever look into any conspiracy ever (2022, 21).

Now, I might be biased; I recently published a paper called “Suspicious Conspiracy Theories” (2022) in which I argue that even theories which look as if they are very *very* unlikely, the epistemic suspiciousness of such theories does not tell us that they are obviously false. I’m also in agreement with Brian L. Keeley, who points out that there is no “mark of the incredible” that allows us to tell on first glance which theories are warranted and which are unwarranted (2007, 137). Some theories are suspicious, sure, and such that they give us grounds for questioning those theories, but the suspiciousness of theories does not tell us they are clearly unwarranted in the sense that they are *false*.<sup>3</sup> The very reason why philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, culture studies theorists and the like have argued against the kind of definitions we see operationalised in (some of) the social science literature is that unless we get precise with what we mean by “conspiracy theory”, we are not going to be able to engage in theoretically fruitful work on what, if anything, is wrong with belief in conspiracy theories either generally or in particular instances.

### **Bush, Blair, and Allegations of Conspiracy Theory**

Now, the conflation of the social practice of *labelling* things as “conspiracy theories” vs. what actually counts as a conspiracy theory has a storied literature (see, for example: Butter and Knight, (2016); deHaven-Smith and Witt (2012); Harambam and Aupers (2014); and Husting and Orr (2007)). Hill is right that a common example cited in the literature concerns the invasion of Iraq in 2003ACE.<sup>4</sup> However (and maybe this is the fault of conspiracy theory theorists who recall the events in question and assume everyone else knows the full story) Hill goes looking for evidence in all the wrong places.

In the build-up to the invasion of Iraq various theories were advanced as to why the UK and the US were pursuing military action. Bush and Blair were aware the dossier

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<sup>3</sup> I am sympathetic to the idea that certain recurrent conspiracy *narratives* should give us reason to pause when considering whether a particular conspiracy theory ought to be taken seriously, but as I argue in my 2022, conspiracy theories which appear to be new iterations of old stereotypes might still—in a range of cases—turn out to be warranted *now*.

<sup>4</sup> Hill casts this example as the star of the “Philosophers” work, but a cursory examination of that work shows I am more likely to talk about Soviet Russia; Pigden deals with a great many Elizabethan examples; Basham talks about the Atomic Energy Commission covering up the effects of radioactive fallout, etc. It turns out we are not one trick ponies.

“legitimising” the invasion was dodgy, and that people knew it. But there were other stories being advanced to explain why the invasion was going ahead regardless, stories that didn’t necessarily require talking about the (lack of) intelligence about WMDs: some people were claiming that the real reason for the invasion was that the UK and the US wanted to control the oil reserves in the Middle-East. This was labeled as a “conspiracy theory” (as it is, whether or not we think it is warranted) and it was used by the US and the UK as a way to sidestep criticism of the invasion by saying “Oh, the people who oppose military action in Iraq are just conspiracy theorists who think we’re only in it for the oil!”

Take, for example, Blair, on March the 6th, 2003:

[W]e’re an exporter of oil. So, we don’t need Iraqi’s oil. We export oil. Secondly, there is a very simple way of dealing with this issue because whatever happens – what happens in a situation like this, there is always a conspiracy theory. It’s not to do with the reasons they say: it’s some terrible conspiracy machination, we want to seize the Iraqi oil. A simple way out of this: we should make sure, if there is a conflict, in any post-conflict Iraq there is a proper UN mandate for Iraq and that oil goes into a trust fund and we don’t touch it, the Americans don’t touch it without UN authority. Now, we can’t say fairer than that. And the idea that this is about oil, I understand why people think it because they’re told it the whole time. We may be right, we may be wrong, but it’s nothing to do with oil – not for us, not for the UK, not for the US – and the best way of testing that is let the thing be done under a proper UN mandate so no one touches the Iraqi oil except where it’s needed for the Iraqi people because it’s their oil, not ours. ... I genuinely believe – I believe there are people who oppose war for perfectly good reasons. Indeed, I oppose war unless it’s the last resort. But, we don’t have any oil interest there (Saraceni 2003, 9).<sup>5</sup>

As we now know, Bush and Blair knew there was no good evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction In Iraq. Pushing that line was not an argument they could win. It was easier, then, to litigate the idea that people only opposed the invasion of Iraq because the Americans and the British were going in there for oil. Bush and Blair had been pushing the idea that their war was a moral one: they *had* to stop Saddam Hussein. It allowed them to act sanctimoniously and imply that their critics couldn’t understand the courage it took to stand up to someone like Hussein.

Indeed, this speaks to curious issue when it comes to talk about conspiracy theories more generally. The use of “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” as a derogative term used by political elites to dismiss opposition to their actions as being *irrational* is often based upon asserting to said opposition views they do not have (or asserting that an uncommon

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<sup>5</sup> See also Tempest (2003). Stories about this were, admittedly, easier to find back in 2003, but they can still be found now, if you know what to look for. We can add to this the various dog whistles Blair and Bush used at the time to avoid criticism (and it’s no surprise Hill can’t find those with a simple search, since the whole point of a dog whistle is that you don’t say the quiet part out loud).

view is common). Years after the fact it is easy to forget the nature of both the original complaint, and how it was dealt with at the time.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the case now, in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq Bush and Blair shifted the goalposts: they moved the discussion away from the dodgy dossier to the easier to combat claim that people who thought the UK and the US were invading Iraq merely to control oil, a conspiracy theory they could more easily paint as unwarranted.

### **Is Hill Stereotyping Work in Philosophy over Conspiracy Theory?**

Finally, I want to touch on the unfortunate stereotyping of the philosophical literature Hill engages in to defend the *Le Monde* authors from the “Philosophers.”

We are told the main thrust of the philosophical debate on conspiracy theories is merely arguing against the utility of talking about *stereotypical* conspiracy theories. Now, luckily for me Kurtis Hagen just published a recent history and bibliography of the philosophy of conspiracy theory in these very pages (2022a). Let me add to that a quick and potted history of said work.

Charles Pigden started the philosophical discussion of conspiracy theories by arguing that Karl Popper’s criticism of the *conspiracy theory of society* was a problem no sensible person believes when it comes to belief in conspiracy theories (1995). In 1999 Brian L. Keeley argued that we might have a case for a *prima facie* suspicion of a certain kind of conspiracy theory (the mature unwarranted conspiracy theory) but there is, as he puts in a latter work, no “mark of the incredible” (2007, 137) which allows us to know *without investigation* which theories are obvious false or stupid (to use Hill’s terminology).

From these two seminal works the literature emerged: Lee Basham has argued as to why we need to be cautious when saying that life in an open society indicates conspiracies should be rare (which would justify a suspicion of conspiracy theories more generally) given the way in which even in an open society, information hierarchies affect our ability to assess claims of conspiracies (2001, 2003, 2011). Steve Clarke has considered how we might analyse conspiracy theories under the lens of Lakatosian research programmes, and why—even if we think conspiracy theories are mostly bad—there might still be a benefit to being open to conspiracy theorising (2002).

David Coady has analysed what, if anything, makes an official story which features a conspiracy different from a pejoratively labelled “conspiracy theory” (2003, 2012), whilst Neil Levy has analysed the role of expertise in official theories vs. conspiracy theories (2007) (something Brian Keeley and myself have also written on (Dentith, 2018a; Dentith and Keeley, 2018)). Juha Räikkä (2009) and Patrick Stokes (2018a, 2018b), in separate pieces, have looked at the tricky ethical conundrum of allowing or permitting conspiracy theorising

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<sup>6</sup> It is useful to compare podcast seasons 5 of “Slow Burn” and 1 of “Blowback” for two different accounts of the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003ACE, and how radically different these accounts are depending on whose point-of-view is taken seriously, and how interested in the history of the event the hosts are.

in politics (and what the consequences might be if we accept we need to investigate claims of conspiracy). Kurtis Hagen has written several papers (2018a, 2018b) and a book (2022b) asking why findings in the social science are presented as definitive when the research is often up to interpretation. I've written on how some conspiracy theories are examples of the inference to the best explanation (2016), the way in which evidence is used to support conspiracy theories and their rivals (2019), and whether we should use the term “debunking” when talking about investigating conspiracy theories (2021) (a topic Hagen has also broached (2020)).

So, whilst it is true that *sometimes* we philosophers talk definitions, when Hill states:

I am unimpressed that the main thrust of the decades long philosophical literature on this topic just amounts to “So you think the stereotypical examples of conspiracy theories are bad? Well guess what? That means you have to think that any belief that any conspiracy ever occurred is bad” (2022, 25).

That's an inaccurate stereotype of the philosophical work to date. Not just that, but I think it's important to note here that the philosophical work is being increasingly recognised by social scientists. Recent work, for example, led by the prominent social psychologist Karen Douglas (also a co-signer of the original “*Le Monde* Declaration”) (Douglas et al. 2019; Douglas and Sutton 2018) has sympathetically cited work by philosophers on conspiracy theory.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, I am an advisor on an European Research Council project led by Douglas, looking at whether belief in conspiracy theories really has the harmful suite of consequences stereotypically associated with them.

So, instead of mistaking a stereotype for what constitutes the philosophy of conspiracy theory theory, I recommend Hill take a deep dive into what philosophers have actually written on the topic. He will find it is not quite the stereotype of the “Philosophers” he presents but, rather, a flourishing academic project, one which is increasingly being cited by those Hill casts as its critics, and has much to offer if you want to understand why working with stereotypes doesn't actually serve the public good.

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<sup>7</sup> See also Nera et al., (2020), and Ahadzadeh et al., (2021) for further examples of philosophical work cited approvingly in the social sciences.



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