

# Debunking conspiracy theories

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Pre-print: Published in *Synthese* 198 (10):9897-9911 (2021)

## Abstract

In this paper I interrogate the notion of ‘debunking conspiracy theories’, arguing that the term ‘debunk’ carries with it pejorative implications, given that the verb ‘to debunk’ is commonly understood as ‘to show the wrongness of a thing or concept’. As such, the notion of ‘debunking conspiracy theories’ builds in the notion that such theories are not just wrong but ought to be shown as being wrong. I argue that we should avoid the term ‘debunk’ (and other such loaded terms) and focus on *investigating* conspiracy theories. Looking at recent research work in epistemology on conspiracy theory, I argue that the best way to avoid talk of ‘debunking’ conspiracy theories is by a) working with a non-pejorative definition of ‘conspiracy theory’, and b) forming *communities of inquiry* which allow us to *investigate* the warrant of such theories without the prejudice associated with working with a pejorative definition.

## Keywords

community of inquiry; conspiracy; conspiracy theory; conspiracy theory  
theory; epistemology

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for comments on this paper, particularly 'Reviewer B' who suggested the labels 'pro-democracy argument' and the 'Debunker's Fallacy'

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## Introduction

The word ‘debunk’ carries with it certain connotations: ‘to debunk’ is, after all, to ‘expose the falseness of something’. As such, as soon as we use the term ‘debunk’ with respect to, say, some conspiracy theory, then we are—*implicitly* or *explicitly*—inferring that said conspiracy theory is almost certainly false.

This linguistic observation is borne out by the existing literature: a cursory search of articles on the topic of conspiracy theory by conspiracy theory theorists (the scholars who study conspiracy theory, and thus engage in ‘conspiracy theory theory’<sup>1</sup>) in the social sciences will pull up a number of instances of the word ‘debunk’ (and its variants) being used to show that conspiracy theories are false or, at very least, unlikely to be true.

Here are some examples: Michael J. Wood and Karen M. Douglas talk about how holders of standard or conventional explanations have to ‘devote a great deal of time to examining and debunking [rival] conspiracy theories (M. J. Wood and Douglas 2013)’; Quassim Cassam chides a fictional conspiracy theorist for not trusting the ‘debunking efforts of genuine experts (Cassam 2016, p. 163)’; Alessandro Bessi, et al. talk both about ‘debunking’ conspiracy theories and the negative way in which conspiracy theorists react to such ‘debunkings’ (Bessi et al. 2015); David

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Michael Butter and Peter Knight’s ‘Bridging the Great Divide: Conspiracy Theory Research for the 21st Century’ (2016).

Robert Grimes talks of Moon Landing Hoax theories being ‘comprehensively debunked (Grimes 2016, p. 3)’; Philippe Huneman and Marion Vorms talk about belief in conspiracy theory as being either wrong or plain irrational, going on to ask how we should debunk such theories (Huneman and Vorms 2018); and Andrew Moore talks of ‘debunking’ conspiracy theories as part of a suite of ‘valuable contributions to democratic citizenship (Moore 2018, p. 111)’.

The intention behind the use of the word ‘debunk’ here is not necessarily bad; whatever you might think of conspiracy theories *generally* there are plenty of unwarranted conspiracy theories that deserve scepticism. However, as recent work on the epistemology (particularly social epistemology<sup>2</sup>) of conspiracy theory has shown, belief in conspiracy theories is not *prima facie* irrational.<sup>3</sup> As we will see, if you define ‘conspiracy theory’ as simply a theory about a conspiracy, then sometimes (and it is an open question as to how often this is the case) conspiracy theories turn out to be examples of inferences to the best explanation.

As such, the worry about the term ‘debunk’—at least with regards to conspiracy theory—is that people tend to think of ‘debunking’ not as demonstrating that a claim is false, but, rather, *assuming* that the claim is false simply because some theory

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<sup>2</sup>See, for example, the work on conspiracy theory theory which is taking place in the journal of the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*.

<sup>3</sup>For a good overview of the literature, see the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s* entry on ‘Conspiracy Theories’ (Pauly 2020) or the edited collection ‘Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously.’ (Dentith 2018b)

has been labelled as ‘conspiratorial.’ This is understandable, since we tend to only be interested in such ‘debunkings’ when we encounter, or have to grapple with, a conspiratorial belief or theory which strikes us as odd, or out of the ordinary. That is, even if we think conspiracies occur (and that some conspiracy theories are warranted), most of the things we call ‘conspiracy theories’ are labelled as such because they are weird claims.

The problem, however, is that for some scholars *all* claims of conspiracy are out-of-the-ordinary *by definition*. We might think of this as the ‘Debunker’s Fallacy’ where rather than admitting that sometimes conspiracies occur, everything (including, it seems, obvious cases of collusion, deception, and conspiracy) ought to be considered through the lens of coincidence instead. As David Coady puts it:

Coincidence theorists are people who fail, as it were, to connect the dots; who fail to see any significance in even the most striking correlations (2012, p. 127).

and as such they ‘have an irrational tendency to reject clear evidence of conspiracy (2012, p. 129)[.]’ Now, as Coady notes, not everyone is a coincidence theorist. But talk of ‘debunking’ often means we end up facing the problem of either assuming conspiracy theories are false or implausible in cases where a more careful consideration of the evidence would render a different conclusion, or that all theories labelled as ‘conspiratorial’ *should* be considered out of the ordinary (since conspiracies are

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thought to be not just rare, but also seldom successful). Thus we end up once again assuming something about a particular theory based upon a broad generalisation of the class of theories as a whole. Yet surely when someone says ‘This might be (or is) the result of a conspiracy!’ you should want to check their reasoning (their evidence and arguments), in the hope they are wrong.<sup>4</sup>

For others it does not matter how rare or common, or how successful or prone to failure conspiracies are. Rather, the problem is that we should not live in a society where conspiracies occur. Thus, claims of conspiracy should be considered as extraordinary, the reaction to which turns out to be ‘That better not be true!’ For such people there is a need to investigate conspiracy theories, either because we want to be reassured our society is as unspired as we should like it to be, or because we want to nip the conspiracies we uncover in our investigations in the bud.

In both cases we should want to *investigate* rather than ‘debunk’ conspiracy theories. This is no minor linguistic dispute; the way in which we frame our approach to the analysis of these things called ‘conspiracy theories’ has an effect upon the products of our subsequent research, as I will now show.

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<sup>4</sup>See also Charles Pigden’s discussion of the ‘cock-up theory of history’ (in press), and Lee Basham and Juha Räikkä’s discussion of ‘conspiracy theory phobia’ (2018) for more on the problems of coincidence theory (and its near relatives).

## A choice of examples

Let us assume that we have grounds to be worried about these things called ‘conspiracy theories’. We often frame this worry with respect to claims about *political* conspiracies<sup>5</sup> because such claims threaten our understanding of, or trust in, political systems.

Now, the kind of examples we use when characterising what counts as a *salient* conspiracy theory when it comes to informing our analysis of such theories affects the *position* we take with respect to belief in them, and thus how we should treat belief in them. For example, there are conspiracy theory theorists who associate, or even conflate supernatural or paranormal beliefs with belief in conspiracy theories.<sup>6</sup> Given that most belief in paranormal or supernatural agency is typically considered weird—if not outright irrational—the association of belief in conspiracy theories with belief in things like ghosts and the like skews discussion of conspiracy theories to the category of the *inherently* implausible.

Other conspiracy theory theorists associate belief in conspiracy theories with

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<sup>5</sup>Or conspiracies involving private, influential institutions which are taken to have a political or political-adjacent character; people are concerned about the lobbying activities, for example, of companies like Google or Facebook, because despite being private institutions, they also wield an awful lot of power when it comes to dealing with nation states and their representatives.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, the work of Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French (2014), Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, Mitchell J. Callan, Rael J. Dawtry and Annelie J. Harvey (2016), and Jan-Willem van Prooijen (2016).

notable political conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones or David Icke. Jones is infamous for his almost daily internet broadcasts, where he discusses New World Order plots to create death camps in preparation for the coming socialist takeover of the US, fluoride being added to the water supply to turn people gay, or claiming that (almost) every mass shooting is a false flag event designed to revoke the Second Amendment to the US Constitution. Icke, on the other hand, believes the world is run by alien shape-shifting lizards who—aside from commanding world affairs—eat babies and drink human blood.

Icke and Jones are often portrayed as exemplar conspiracy theorists.<sup>7</sup> However, by focussing on notable—but not necessarily typical—conspiracy theorists we often end up skewing our understanding of what counts as a ‘conspiracy theory’. After all, if we think of conspiracy theories as *typically* being about alien, shape-shifting reptiles or FEMA death camps in the centre of US cities, then we are associating belief in a certain class of political conspiracy theory with belief in conspiracy theories more generally. Not every conspiracy theorist after all is an Alex Jones or a David Icke: indeed, depending on your definition of who counts as a conspiracy theorist, your Ickes and Jones might be exceptional examples, notable only by virtue of how *untypical* they are compared to garden variety conspiracy theorists.

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<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011), Michael J. Wood and Karen M. Douglas (2013), Bradley Franks, Adrian Bangerter and Martin W. Bauer (2013), Franks and Bangerter, Bauer, and Matthew Hall and Mark C. Noort (2017), and Joseph E. Uscinski (2018).



As such, our choice of examples of who counts as a ‘conspiracy theorist’ affects how we treat what we take to be typical examples of ‘conspiracy theories.’ But it would be a mistake to generalise from notable examples of conspiracy theorists like Icke and Jones to the claim all conspiracy theorists (and thus all belief in conspiracy theories) is similar; to make that claim we would need to claim they are both notable and typical of the class of conspiracy theorists. Yet the fact they are notable presumably means their beliefs are somewhat outside the norm for conspiracy theorists generally. In the same respect, it might be the case that some of the features of belief in conspiracy theories resembles belief in supernatural or paranormal beliefs, but such a comparison really requires that we get to grips with how we define what counts as a ‘conspiracy theory.’

## **A choice of definitions**

A conspiracy theory is some theory about a conspiracy; to wit, a theory about some activity undertaken in secret by two or more people towards some end. On this most conspiracy theory theorists agree.<sup>8</sup> However, as previously noted, we tend to be interested in claims about *political* conspiracies, because the kind of conspiratorial activity that typically concerns us happens to be political in nature.

However, when it comes to defining what counts as a ‘conspiracy theory’ we

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<sup>8</sup>For a survey of definitions see Dentith (2018).

find there are two competing definitions in the literature. One builds in that they are typically *unwarranted* theories, and this is because belief in the existence of the conspiracies they posit is suspicious for epistemological or psychological reasons. The other definition posits that they are merely theories about conspiracies, and thus must be judged on the evidence.

The argument that says we have a justified and *prima facie* suspicion of conspiracy theories is known in the philosophical literature as ‘Generalism’, and there has been a growing discontent with such an approach to conspiracy theory by philosophers.<sup>9</sup> They have argued that we cannot dismiss conspiracy theories out-of-hand merely because they are conspiracy theories. Rather, they have argued that we should assess particular conspiracy theories on the nature of the evidence for or against them. This is known as ‘Particularism’.<sup>10</sup> It is the argument that we cannot generally dismiss or treat with scepticism these things called ‘conspiracy theories’. After all, if people had simply taken President Richard Nixon’s word that the allegations in the Watergate Affair were just ‘conspiracy theories’, then the conspiracy may never have come to light. In the same respect, if people had treated seriously UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George W. Bush’s claims that worries about evi-

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<sup>9</sup>See the aforementioned *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on ‘Conspiracy Theory’ (Pauly 2020).

<sup>10</sup>Both ‘generalism’ and ‘particularism’ are terms of art we owe to work of Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor (2010).

dence which supposedly justified the invasion of Iraq in 2003<sup>ACE</sup> were simply based on outrageous conspiracy theories, then the major intelligence failures of those governments might never have come to light.

That is, sometimes to theorise about conspiracies is crucial to the health of our political systems. In a representative democracy, for example, we should want to check that our elected leaders are not involved in conspiracies (major or minor). As Basham notes, when discussing what we might term the ‘pro-democracy’ argument as to why we ought to guard against conspiracies in the polis, a ‘[c]ommitment to the success of our system of representational democracy can easily, even predictably, be twisted into a betrayal of that very system (2018, p. 289).’

Now, this is not to say that we should treat each and every conspiracy theory as warranted. Rather, we have to treat conspiracy theories seriously if we want to assess particular instances of them. This, then, is the particularist project: it is predicated on the acceptance that as conspiracies occur, we can only dismiss particular instances of them if someone does the investigative work to check that they are actually unwarranted.

As a rule most philosophers who work on conspiracy theory theory work with a general, non-pejorative definition of ‘conspiracy theory’. As Patrick Stokes notes, something close to a ‘broad consensus’ has emerged out of the work of philosophers (at least when it comes to conspiracy theory) (2018).<sup>11</sup> This is, in itself, startling:

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<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Lee Basham (2011), Charles Pigden (2018) and Kurtis Hagen (2018) .

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as Coady argues with respect to the work originating in Social Psychology, there is much ambiguity and equivocation when it comes to the notion of the conspiracy theory *generally*, leading to what seems like a progressive research programme, but one which evaporates when you realise conspiracy theory theorists are working with incommensurate definitions of both what counts as a ‘conspiracy theory’, and who qualifies as a ‘conspiracy theorist’ (Coady 2019).

Philosophers have tended to focus on historical examples of actual conspiracies, mostly because many of them were contemporaneously and pejoratively labelled as ‘conspiracy theories’. From the Moscow Show Trials of the 1930s, the Watergate Scandal of the 1960s, and arguably the Weapons of Mass Destruction narrative used to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003<sup>ACE</sup>, philosophers have noted not only that governments have conspired, but they have also used the general suspicion concerning claims about conspiracy against the public in order to hide said conspiracies. The choice to work with historical examples of conspiracy theories—ones which turned out to be warranted—flips the script on the discourse around conspiracy theory: as Charles Pigden argues, anyone who is historically or politically literate turns out to be a conspiracy theorist: either you believe the history books or contemporary media reports of conspiratorial behaviour, or you think they are something akin to fake news. No matter which side you take, however, you really must accept that conspiracies occur. As such, we are all conspiracy theorists of some stripe (C. R.

Pigden in press).

The consensus in Philosophy puts (most) philosophers on the side of the thesis that we cannot generalise about conspiracy theories but, rather—if we are to judge their warrant—we must appraise particular instances of them with respect to the evidence.

Our choice of exemplar conspiracy theories, then, tends to come out of our choice of how we define what counts as the proper subject of a ‘conspiracy theory’ (although sometimes the reverse is true). That is, this choice directly affects the kind of analysis we go on to perform on these things called ‘conspiracy theories’ generally because it (often implicitly) affects what we think of as ‘conspiracy theories’.

## **What to do about the conspiracists?**

You might, however, think the following: there is a special kind of belief in conspiracy theory—often labelled as ‘conspiracist ideation’ or ‘conspiracism’—which is so problematic that even if belief in *particular* conspiracy theories can be warranted, conspiracist belief *generally* is a problem, one in search of a cure. After all, some conspiracy theorists—like the aforementioned David Ickes and Alex Jones—really seem to believe the weird theories they propound, and they often appear immune to evidence or arguments which question such theories.

However, whilst there certainly is a *potentially* problematic form of conspiratorial thinking, it is not clear how big or small this problem is. That is, whilst we can describe a kind of extreme and problematic form of belief in conspiracy theories—to wit, an excessive belief in conspiracy theories—it is not obvious that this is a widespread issue, in part because we once again might be mistaking the extraordinary notability of a small number of such theorists with the class of conspiracy theorists generally.

Of course, it is also possible that the Ickes and Jones of this world do not really believe their own theories; there is a question as to how committed, or sincere such conspiracy theorists are with respect to their professed conspiracy theories. This is, of course, not a problem unique to conspiracy theorists. Politicians often promote policies they do not agree with, journalists push stories because of their editors, and people sometimes claim to believe a certain view just to annoy a friend or family member.

More importantly, however, is the possibility that people who believe fantastical conspiracy theories might not be committed to them being true: sometimes people only have a weak commitment to such beliefs; that is, if pressed about some idea they have espoused they will say something like ‘I don’t necessarily believe it; I’m just entertaining the idea....’ For example, some conspiracy theorists will claim to be suspicious about politicians and business leaders, leading them to suspect there

is something rotten in the body politic. However, a suspicion that something is wrong does not necessarily commit them to any particular conspiracy theory; they may well entertain the idea of a variety of conspiracy theories without necessarily being strongly committed to even one of them. They are conspiracy theorising (after all, being suspicious that conspiracies might be occurring is to engage with conspiracy theory) but such suspicions do not entail any strong commitment in a resultant conspiracy theory. Or, at least, not in the first instance; the good particularist, for example, will investigate further and gather more evidence.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, people who we might pejoratively label as ‘conspiracy theorists’ in the sense of them being *conspiracists* might simply suspect something, and thus entertain the notion a particular conspiracy theory as a plausible *but not necessarily warranted* explanation of that suspicious state of affairs.<sup>13</sup>

This is to argue that what we might take to be a problem—excessive conspiracy theorising by some conspiracy theorists—might well be explicable with respect to the notion that you can espouse a conspiracy theory without being committed to the

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<sup>12</sup>This is not to say that suspicion of something being wrong in the body politics is not sufficient to generate a theory about some conspiracy. Rather, it is to say that such suspicions do not necessarily commit people to conspiracy theories; someone can think that politicians are untrustworthy, for example, without thinking they are engaged in conspiracies (they could, for example, just be seen as venial and self-serving).

<sup>13</sup>For more on this, see Wood (2017), Dentith (2018), and Petar Lukićab, Iris Žeželj and Biljana Stanković (2019).

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truth of that theory. Sometimes being suspicious of something means entertaining a variety of different hypotheses about what might be happening. To be clear, it does seem that Icke and Jones really do believe their particular conspiracy theories. However, if they are notable but not necessarily typical conspiracy theorists, then we need to consider conspiracy theorists and their beliefs more broadly. As such, we should be cautious about how we talk about conspiracy theorising, as we do not want to conflate committed belief in some conspiracy theory with cases of someone just being suspicious that something weird is happening.

Not just that, but debunking the work of notable conspiracy theorists in cases where their professed conspiracy theories might not resemble typical belief in conspiracy theories may well backfire; the assumption that once we have debunked Icke and Jones we have shown belief in conspiracy theories *generally* is also unwarranted will not wash with people who then go ‘But that’s not what I think. What I believe is...’

This gets us back to definitions: if you accept that all a conspiracy theory happens to be is some theory about a conspiracy, and conspiracy theorists are simply people who believe at least one conspiracy theory, then the pool of who we consider to be ‘conspiracy theorists’ becomes an interesting question. That is, if we accept the kind of definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ common to the philosophical literature, then these fantastical conspiracy theories are not necessarily representa-



tive of the class of conspiracy theories generally. As such, if conspiracist ideation or conspiracism is a problem, it only applies to a subset of conspiracy theorists.<sup>14</sup>

## **Conspiracy theorising as a cultural contingent activity**

This dovetails into an issue which has seen little attention in the conspiracy theory theory literature: much of the work on conspiracy theory has—to date—been focussed on Western examples of conspiracy theories. Yet if we take into account, for example, former Communist polities in Eastern European, the kind of examples we might be tempted to use in our analyses often come out of cultures with a rich history of overt corruption and associated conspiracy.

Take, for example, Romania: its Communist period is replete with conspiracy (particularly around the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu); the December Revolution of 1989 has long been the topic of conspiracy theories; and the post-Communist period is a litany of government-led corruption. Romanians have good reason to conspiracy theorise because Romanians have a lived experience of corruption and conspiracy by their successive governments.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>For more on this, see ‘The Problem of Conspiracism’ (2018).

<sup>15</sup>For more on the Romanian situation, see ‘Conspiracy Theory Theory, Epistemology, and Eastern Europe’ (Dentith in press).

For people in certain cultural, political, or social contexts, conspiracy theorising can be normal and even vital for the functioning of the polis.<sup>16</sup> If you live in a society where conspiracies are a routine occurrence (or, at least, more common than in other nations), to not suspect and theorise about conspiracies would be both an epistemic and psychological failing.

It should be obvious that conspiracy theorising is an activity which is very much contingent on the political structures and society of the place a conspiracy theorist lives. I think, then, that a fault of conspiracy theory theory generally is a fixation on Western examples.

This is not to say that non-Western polities are awash with conspiracy theories. As studies have shown, belief in conspiracy theories in Eastern European countries does not differ significantly from their Western counterparts.<sup>17</sup> However, in certain polities where corruption is perceived to be high, it is reasonable for people in those polities to harbour suspicions about corruption, collusion, and—of course—conspiracies.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Arguable conspiracy theorising in the sense of being *attentive to potential conspiracies* is vital in any nation, in that conspiratorial activity is a suspicious activity we ought to keep in check.

<sup>17</sup>See, for example, 'The Conspiratorial Mindset in an Age of Transition: Conspiracy Theories in France, Hungary and Slovakia' (Gyárfášová et al. 2013).

<sup>18</sup>Measures of perceived corruption exist: Transparency International (TI) produce a Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) which considers corruption as perceived by business members and the members of other large organizations who work in a given society (Transparency International

Whilst perceived corruption in particular nation state does not necessarily mean said country is corrupt, such perceptions do not come out of nowhere. Post-Communist countries in Eastern Europe, as previously mentioned, are often perceived as rife with both corrupt and conspiracies.<sup>19</sup> When a society is perceived to be corrupt, this suggests a lack of trust in the influential institutions of that society. Thus, if your particular nation turns out to have a long history of actual conspiracy, then it seems reasonable in these cases to suspect that they might still be occurring. This is why we can say that the perception of past and current corruption affects our judgement about the probability of similar behaviours now and in the future.

Discussion of the role probabilities play in judging the warrant of particular conspiracies has been central to much recent work in philosophy on conspiracy theory. Basham, for example, discusses the prior probability of conspiracy in a society, arguing that '[t]he perceived prior probability of conspiracy determines the birth and evidential development of conspiracy theories (2011, p. 64).' I have previously discussed the role of prior, posterior and relative probability with respect to when we might infer that a conspiracy theory is the best explanation (2016). We have argued that, given certain background information about how prevalent you

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2018). There is also the 'Digital News Report,' which focusses on trust and misinformation when considering news consumption (Radu 2017). Eastern European polities tend to score on average as being relatively corrupt compared to their Western counterparts.

<sup>19</sup>For more examples of this, see the chapter on Slovakia in 'Conspiracy Theories in Europe: A Compilation (Mesežnikov 2014).'

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think conspiracies are in your society, you are more or less likely to be suspicious about the incidence of conspiracies occurring now.<sup>20</sup> As we saw earlier, part of the problem here is definitional: we tend to rule out certain kinds of conspiratorial activity as not being conspiratorial enough to qualify as the subject of a conspiracy theory, thus underplaying the likelihood of conspiracy theories generally.<sup>21</sup>

There is also the worry that the kind of assumption that drives a lot of scepticism of conspiracy theories in the West is itself ahistorical. The kind of political norms which underpin the open and transparent nature of (most) Western democracies are both relatively recent in formation, and are sometimes merely brokered conventions rather than based in laws or constitutions. Not just that, but it seems Western democracies might be in danger of slipping back into illiberal regimes (see, for example, President Trump's attacks against the free press in the US, as well as his praise of state-run media in non-Western countries). The kinds of political norms we think give us reason to be suspicious of conspiracy theories generally might well turn out to be temporary. As such, what drives the assumption behind the 'debunking' of conspiracy theories—that they are clearly false or very unlikely to be warranted—is an assumption which is questionable in some places and may only be

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<sup>20</sup>Much of this kind of analysis owes itself to Pigden's seminal work, where he argues that as 'History is littered with conspiracies successful and otherwise (1995, p. 3)' the superstition that says we ought to dismiss conspiracy theories is untenable in the face of the evidence.

<sup>21</sup>See, for a discussion of the problems that come out of skewed definitions of what counts as the proper topic of a conspiracy theory, Hagen's 2017.

a temporary state of affairs in the West to begin with.

## **The problem with ‘debunking’**

The problem with the notion of ‘debunking’ conspiracy theories—as I have already argued—is that ‘to debunk’ implies the thing being investigated is likely false. Yet if we accept either the definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ offered by most of the philosophers working in this field, or that in certain political contexts conspiracy theorising does not seem unreasonable, then we should not—even inadvertently—be working with pejorative terms.

After all, most theories do not survive rigorous analysis: there are a lot of scientific theories, for example, generated on a daily basis, and most of them will be ‘debunked’ eventually. Realistically, very few theories, whether they be historical, psychological, scientific—or conspiratorial—survive even a cursory analysis. Yet we typically do not use ‘debunk’ to describe our approach to assessing other kinds of theories. We do not usually set out to ‘debunk’ scientific hypotheses, or new theories in psychology. We might sometimes refer to theories which have been tested and found wanting as ‘debunked’ *after the fact*, but we seem to recognise that an attitude of always setting out to ‘debunk’ theories elsewhere would look imperious.

This, then, is an issue of framing: the way in which you frame a question often assumes or induces a particular kind of answer. So talking about ‘debunking’—even

if you think you are using the term non-pejoratively—tilts the scale.

This is important for a variety of reasons. The first is do with how we frame our research, as we have just seen. The second concerns how we talk about conspiracy theories to the general public. No matter what conspiracy theory theorists might claim, there will be some members of the general public who believe conspiracy theories to always be false, and that conspiracy theorists are loony/weird/mad/crazy (or some other term which marks them out as quintessentially irrational). So, when we talk *publicly* about ‘debunking’ conspiracy theories we are often playing into a certain characterisation of conspiracy theory that is not necessarily what the literature tells us, but is somehow nonetheless thought to be the ‘commonsense’ position. It does not help that sometimes the work of conspiracy theory theorists is misrepresented, misrepresented or even twisted to fit specific narratives about conspiracy theories.

This doesn’t mean we should give up on investigating and analysing choice examples of conspiracy theories. But it does mean we should ensure that the language we use doesn’t give the impression that we think all conspiracy theorists are deluded or believe in theories we take it are *prima facie* false. The term ‘debunk’ (and its close cousins) has strong connotations, and thus we should avoid using it. This should not affect the respective research projects of the conspiracy theory theorist community. It just means we need to thinking about not only framing our research outputs, but

how we phrase the questions which drive said research in the first place.

## **Investigating, rather than ‘debunking’ conspiracy theories**

Rather than debunking conspiracy theories, then, we should *investigate* them like we would any other kind of theory. However, saying that is one thing; doing it is another. Unlike scientific theories, historical theories, and the like, there are no obvious experts we can appeal to appraising particular conspiracy theories.<sup>22</sup> So, how might we investigate such theories, One model—which has historical salience—is that of the *Community of Inquiry*. This is a model in which a democratic and participatory committee engage in a joint investigation of a theory or problem, and comes out of the work of John Dewey (1938) and C. S. Pierce (1958). A community of inquiry-style investigation is one where the members of the community work together, in order to distribute the epistemic load.

A community of inquiry approach has some historical precedent when it comes to the investigation of conspiracy theories. During the 1930s Joseph Stalin, then leader of the USSR, oversaw a trial of his political enemies, who were eventually convicted in court of conspiring to return Leon Trotsky—Stalin’s former ally-turned-enemy—to the USSR where he could seize control of the Communist Party.

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<sup>22</sup>See my joint work with Brian L. Keeley for more on this (2018).

Or, at least, that was what was claimed. Dewey formed the *Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (AKA the *Dewey Commission*) to investigate the claims made in the trials. The commission—consisting of Dewey (a philosopher) and ten other members (historians, activists, journalists, and a criminologist) found that the trials were, in fact, mock trials, designed to legitimise a purge of Stalin’s enemies. There was—they concluded—no conspiracy to return Trotsky to the Kremlin.

The Community of Inquiry model solves a number of issues when it comes to assessing conspiracy theories. It allows for a variety of different subject matter experts, and the lay public, to distribute the burden of investigating an issue (conspiracy theory or otherwise).

Diversity is key: for a community of inquiry to work you need people with different kinds of expertise: academics, professional investigators (members of the police; jurists; etc.), journalists, and the like. They should come from, and represent, different parts of society: women; men; rich; poor; ethnic minorities; and the like. They also also be made up of people who have different attitudes towards these things called ‘conspiracy theories’. A community of inquiry that is entirely made up of people who have preset conclusions about conspiracy theories generally, or some conspiracy theory in particular, are not likely to investigate the claim properly, nor are their results likely to be taken seriously by people outside of that particular com-



munity. In this respect diversity helps mitigate against the idea such investigations are designed to ‘debunk’ conspiracy theories. If the community consists of believers, sceptics, and those who are non-committal about the viability of a given conspiracy upon the start of an investigation, whatever conclusion comes out of the inquiry is more likely to sway hearts-and-minds.

Not just that, but a community made up of diverse members is less likely to be accused of being in on some conspiracy. The last thing we want is for conspiracy theories to form around our investigation of other conspiracy theories. In order to ensure that whatever verdict the community comes is not treated as a stitch-up—if the community is genuinely divided on their final assessment—both majority and minority reports should be published. That way the members of the community who disagree with their peers can explain their reasoning, and thus the general public will be able to see where said differences of opinion come from.

Such communities also do not necessarily need to operate *in public*. That is, if we are worried that talking about conspiracy theories publicly might lead to negative social consequences—such as drawing attention to a dubious claim, or bringing people out of the woodwork—then as long as the products of such an investigation includes publicly available outputs (including the evidence and methodology used), we can investigate them methodically behind closed doors. Whilst a private or ‘behind closed doors’ investigation might lead some to thinking a cover-up has

occurred, we have (and have had for a while) processes, as well as the technology, to ensure that the minutiae of such an inquiry is logged such that the end result can be transparent even if the process was undertaken in apparent secrecy.

Indeed, this is one reason why we want to ensure that our communities of inquiry are made up of a number of diverse voices, including those with a favourable disposition towards conspiracy theories. If we are interested in a serious discussion of belief in conspiracy theories, and we want people to take heed of that and challenge their own beliefs and preconceptions about some conspiracy theory, then we need to bring conspiracy theorists along with us. Or, at least, ensure that our work is open to them. This is one such benefit to the community of inquiry approach: the diverse nature of the community of inquirers means that even if we end up endorsing some position, those who disagree with the verdict will be aware that the decision-making process included sceptics and believers.

Now, just like in the sciences and history, some previously ‘debunked’ theories will reoccur from time to time, and we will be able to fall back upon previous analyses to show that this new iteration offers nothing novel.<sup>23</sup> Admittedly, working out whether a new-but-similar conspiracy theory is simply a repeat of an older theory, or

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<sup>23</sup>Indeed, it is interesting to note that the Oxford English Dictionary’s first recorded instance of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ refers to it as being a ‘recrudescence’ of an earlier conspiracy theory, suggesting that the pejorative way in which that theory was being discussed was all due to some previous investigation of the claim (2011).

is a novel contribution to the genre is not necessarily a trivial task: in some cases the same conclusion might be presented (say, ‘Fluoride is a government plot to dumb the people down!’) but with a novel argument resting on completely new evidence. New arguments for old conclusions will need to be assessed, because they might cite new and novel evidence, which could show that what we previously thought was an unlikely conclusion is now warranted. However, one benefit of having already performed an analysis of the older arguments is that new evidence can be weighed more quickly.<sup>24</sup>

The community of inquiry model provides a way to investigate conspiracy theories in a communal and supportive fashion by distributing the epistemic and temporal burden of investigating claims over a diverse community of inquiring minds. Such a community of inquiry into a particular conspiracy theory should (although in some cases it might not) produce a compelling, if not definitive, assessment as to whether some claim of conspiracy—the conspiracy theory—ought to be taken seriously by the general public.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Indeed, in an ideal world, communities of inquiry will use counterfactual reasoning in their analyses anyway: not only would they assess the arguments on the available evidence, they should ask ‘What would need to be the case for this to be true?’ As such, a comprehensive analysis of some particular conspiracy theory will encompass alternative arguments as a given.

<sup>25</sup>For further discussion of this see Basham’s 2018 (particularly footnote 40), and Dentith (2018).

## Conclusion

I started this article by arguing that we should not use the term ‘debunk’ when talking about assessing conspiracy theories. Of course, not all of us that term in our academic work, yet I would argue that conspiracy theory theorists need to think carefully about just how they phrase their work. It is true that there are problematic examples of belief in conspiracy theories, but there are examples of problematic belief in any kind of theory. It might be the case that conspiracy theories are a particularly tricky case, with unique epistemic and psychological issues when it comes to belief in such theories. But an approach to the analysis of conspiracy theory which starts from the perspective that these theories are inherently problematic is itself a problem, as I have shown.

Even those conspiracy theory theorists are not guilty of the ‘sin’ of talking about ‘debunking’ conspiracy theories often fall prey to the problem that such ‘debunkings’ represent: they often frame their discussion—either generally, or with respect to particular instances—with respect to the notion that such theories are likely to be implausible, or unwarranted. Yet all is not lost. As is evident with some of the more recent work, say, in social psychology and political science, conspiracy theory theorists are beginning to realise that a focus solely on the negative social consequences of belief in conspiracy theories has masked the fact that not all belief in conspiracy

theories ends up being pathological.<sup>26</sup>, This brings the literature more in line with how it started: Karl Popper (1969), Richard Hofstadter (1965), and Gordon S. Wood (1982) all argued, in the middle to latter part of the 20th Century that sometimes belief in conspiracy theories is predicated on the existence of actual conspiracies. Our research should start with questions as to when are such conspiracy theories are warranted or unwarranted, rather than trying to solve the problem of belief in such theories, especially if it turns out we are consigning good beliefs in with the bad.

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<sup>26</sup>See, for example, 'The Study of Conspiracy Theories (Uscinski 2018b)'

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