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In Defence of Particularism: A Reply to Stokes

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There has been a flurry of talk of conspiracy theories in these pages recently, largely led by Lee Basham and myself engaging in friendly correspondence over my paper ‘When inferring to a conspiracy theory might be the best explanation.’<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> Patrick Stokes, another philosopher interested in the philosophy of conspiracy theories, has gently criticised both Basham and myself for our portrayal of the tension between generalist takes on belief in conspiracy theories—which portray belief in conspiracy theories as typically irrational—and our particularist agenda, which requires that we assess conspiracy theories on the particulars of their evidence, rather than just dismiss them because they are called ‘conspiracy theories’.

Stokes’ criticism is not a defence of generalism *per se*. Rather, he takes it that Basham and I are over-egging the pot, so to speak, and not admitting that some part of the generalist agenda is worth hanging on to. Stokes proposes some kind of middle ground, or third way: in his own words, ‘defeasible generalism’ or ‘reluctant particularism.’<sup>4</sup> I am sympathetic to Stokes’ overall point: more nuance in how we talk about conspiracy theories in public discourse, and the epistemic and psychological factors at the root of why people hang views on certain recurrent conspiracy narratives can only be of benefit to the academic literature at large. Yet despite this, I find myself troubled by some of the details and arguments Stokes uses to motivate this.

### **The Alleged Problem of Particularism**

Stokes gently chastises us for downplaying worries about the *cultural and social practices* associated with allegations of conspiracy. As Stokes’ puts it:

[T]here is ... [a] risk of allowing a legitimate target of critique to hide within an innocent larger category of “conspiracy explanation.” That target is conspiracy theorizing as a recognizable concrete social practice and tradition. When people dismiss something as a “conspiracy theory” they don’t do so in a vacuum. Nor are they necessarily referring to a specific and precisely defined epistemological category.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Stokes argues there is a very real danger here, in that the particularist—in their defence of the epistemology of conspiracy theorising—ignores or downplays the ‘morally serious act of accusation’.<sup>6</sup> As supporting evidence of this, he discusses the case of James Tracy, a former Professor of Communications at Florida Atlantic University, whose tenure was recently terminated.<sup>7</sup> Stokes is right to point out that Tracy was not fired for conspiracy

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<sup>1</sup> Basham, “The Need for Accountable Witnesses.”

<sup>2</sup> Dentith, “When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation.”

<sup>3</sup> Dentith, “Treating Conspiracy Theories Seriously.”

<sup>4</sup> Stokes, “Between Generalism and Particularism About Conspiracy Theory,” 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> I should like to state that I know Jim, have had drinks with Jim, and have interviewed (and been interviewed by) Jim for our respective podcasts.

theorising *per se*. Rather, he was fired on the grounds that he was taken to be harassing the father of one of the victims of the Sandy Hook Massacre, making accusations that said father was crying wolf about his son's death (and, indeed, existence).

Now, there is nothing inherently wrong about theorising that mass shooting events in the US might be part of a plot, say, by the federal government to curb gun rights. That is a perfectly interesting question. Indeed, I would argue, entertaining that notion is something someone, somewhere should engage in.<sup>8</sup> The move to accusation, though—Stokes' worry—seems like something we should have a threshold for. It is one thing to ponder the epistemics of conspiracy. It is another to engage in the morally serious act of making accusations. Yet I worry that he is conflating two separate issues because Stokes goes on to characterise conspiracy theorising as:

[A] practice that involves beliefs that are largely impervious to rational refutation, that characteristically encourages participants to level an expanding range of un-evidenced accusations, that is inimical to and corrosive of foundational trust, and that in some cases license behaviors (even among college professors) such as harassing and defaming grieving parents. One might reasonably be concerned about such a practice.<sup>9</sup>

Is this social and cultural practice really conspiracy *theorising*, though, or is it the hooking of certain views on to conspiracy *narratives*?

## Conspiracy Narratives

Talk of conspiracy narratives—the complex social and psychological factors which seem to underpin elements of certain recurrent claims of conspiracy—is an interesting field with a long history. Indeed, Richard Hofstadter's seminal piece, 'The paranoid style in American politics' is, arguably, less about conspiracy theories as it is about the conspiracy narratives employed in US politics.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, that was the tenor of Gordon S. Wood's criticism of Hofstadter, in which he examines talk of conspiracy in 18th and 19th Century North America in order to show Hofstadter's claims about the exceptionalism of 20th Century US politics has a much longer history.<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt looks at the role stories about perfidious Jesuits played in France at about the same time,<sup>12</sup> a topic Thomas Kaiser, et al. also examine.<sup>13</sup> Victoria Emma Pagán looks back to Ancient Rome, and the way in which certain tropes reoccur in talk of conspiracy in Roman literature.<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> Joseph Roisman provides

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<sup>8</sup> I imagine someone in a room, dispassionately coming up with conspiracy theories, and then getting her lackeys to see if they have any merit.

<sup>9</sup> Stokes, "Between Generalism and Particularism About Conspiracy Theory," 38

<sup>10</sup> Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays*.

<sup>11</sup> Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style."

<sup>12</sup> Cubitt, *The Jesuit Myth*.

<sup>13</sup> Kaiser, Linton, and Campbell, *Conspiracy in the French Revolution*.

<sup>14</sup> Pagán, *Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History*.

<sup>15</sup> Pagán, *Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature*.

a similar analysis for such talk in Ancient Athens.<sup>16</sup> Conspiracy narratives are cases where alleged conspiracies by the usual suspects—women, slaves, Jews, Catholics, and the like—are used as convenient scapegoats. These narratives are arational, in that they are rhetorical bad habits (“Somethings wrong in your neighbourhood. Who you gonna blame? Feminists!”), which are not epistemically constrained, nor are they deployed on the basis of evidence. Now, whilst I do not agree with some of the conclusions these authors draw from their historical analyses of such narratives, it is intriguing to see how certain conspiratorial tropes reoccur in particular societal settings. It is, then, unfortunate, that Stokes’ chooses to cite—one assumes approvingly—the work of Jovan Byford.

Byford is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the Open University. In his 2011 book, ‘Conspiracy theories: a critical introduction’, he writes:

Chapter 2 sets the scene for the subsequent discussion by looking at *how legitimate analyses of secrecy and collusion in politics might be differentiated from conspiracy theories*. It looks at why it is important (although not always easy) to maintain the distinction between the two types of explanation.<sup>17</sup>

Why does Byford need to distinguish between ‘legitimate analyses of secrecy’ and conspiracy theories? Because he’s a generalist. Throughout his book Byford talks about conspiracy theories as being merely rhetorical devices,<sup>18</sup> claims conspiracy theories as we know them have their origin in the French Revolution<sup>19</sup> (a claim so ahistorical it is hard to treat seriously, especially given the work of the aforementioned historians), are anti-Semitic in character (even if they do not immediately appear to be so),<sup>20</sup> and that we should resist taking conspiracy theories seriously, or even recognising them as a view of the world worth listening to.<sup>21</sup>

Byford is a generalist, pure and simple, and he develops an analysis of this thing called ‘conspiracy theorising’ in order to show that, generally, it produces bad theories. As a consequence, we do not need to engage with these theories on the evidence.

It’s useful, then, to compare Byford with Lance deHaven-Smith, who also thinks we should distinguish between conspiracy theories and legitimate analyses of secrecy. deHaven-Smith is a proponent of a very particular set of 9/11 conspiracy theories, the Inside Job hypotheses (which claim the events of 9/11 were orchestrated by elements within the US, likely the government). deHaven-Smith recognises his beliefs are usually labelled pejoratively as ‘conspiracy theories’, and thus thinks that we should avoid using the label. Instead, he wants us to focus our attention on what he calls ‘state crimes against democracy’, or SCADS.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Roisman, *The Rhetoric of Conspiracy in Ancient Athens*.

<sup>17</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 7.

<sup>22</sup> deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*.

Byford and deHaven-Smith are keen to rob conspiracy theory of its potency by appealing to their intuition that something about conspiracy theorising is considered fishy by most people. Byford wants us to embrace our scepticism of conspiracy theories by showing that conspiracy theorising is a problem. deHaven-Smith wants to rescue the central concerns of the conspiracy theorist by simply giving what she does a new and untarnished name. Yet both of these moves are problematic. Byford overstates his case, largely by assuming conspiracy theories are bad, and then engaging in *post facto* reasoning to justify his conclusion. deHaven-Smith simply renames his problem. ‘Sure,’ he might well be saying, ‘No one trusts homeopathy, but my new homeopathy\* won’t suffer the same kind of criticisms!’

Both of these conspiracy theory theorists are invoking the spectre of a kind of conspiracy narrative infecting decent talk about when we might think some dastardly secret plot is occurring. That is to say, they are worried about conspiracy *narratives* rather than conspiracy *theorising*.

The same criticisms cannot be levelled at the historians. Whether or not we accept their folk-psychological or folk-sociological views about the general warrant of the theories they focus on, they—at the very least—situate their worries about conspiracy narratives into the specific milieu of the cultures and periods they study. Byford, unfortunately, is just a bad example for Stokes.

None of this is to say that Stokes’ overall point should be dismissed. We will get to the merits of his contribution in the next section. Rather, I am keen to point out that the idea that we can fruitfully analyse conspiracy theories as a general mode of explanation—as Byford does—and thus come to a nuanced, rather than what Stokes’ calls a ‘naive’ particularism often just ends up simply rehashing or relabelling the very problematic views particularists have been fighting against since Charles Pigden started work on this epistemological project back in 1995.<sup>23</sup>

### **In Defence of Conspiracy Theorising**

This brings us back to Tracy. His accusation that a certain son never existed—and thus never died—at Sandy Hook is based upon his conviction that the Sandy Hook mass shooting event was a hoax. However, in the final accounting, Tracy’s terminal error was to insist someone provide a birth certificate for their son, to prove that said son had ever existed. Tracy made a serious accusation, which said father took to be harassment. This is what his employer, the university, took a dim view of.<sup>24</sup> However, we must note that you can theorise about conspiracy theories *without making accusations*. Tracy could have (and, indeed, did for a time) theorise about mass shooting events being false flag events without making

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<sup>23</sup> Pigden, “Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories.”

<sup>24</sup> Like Stokes, I also am not making any claim here about the appropriateness of the university’s response to the claim of harassment. However, I take it to be obvious that Tracy’s claim is a serious one, and that there are moral costs to making such a accusation.

explicit accusations.<sup>25</sup> Even then, in the case where the conspiracy theorist makes an accusation, it is not necessarily the case that they will make ever expanding accusations.

Stokes would be better off pressing his point against conspiracy narratives. The way in which certain conspiracy narratives repeat tropes and forms, after all, is a recognised problem, and it is certainly the case that we see the same accusations—*mutatis mutandis*—occur over and over again with respect for them. For example, the long history of recurrent anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives—which were given voice once again in the last week of Donald J. Trump’s presidential campaign—shows some claims of conspiracy will refuse to die regardless of how much evidence that we might lay against them. Narratives like these, despite a mass of evidence weighed against them over time, unfortunately continue to reappear.<sup>26</sup>

However, if Stokes wants to push the point more generally, and bring in conspiracy theorising, then he will end up misrepresenting things. We can understand the reticence to engage in the accusation of conspiracy *without having to drag conspiracy theorising into things*. Conspiracy theorising does not require ever expanding accusations. The problem, rather, Stokes is tilting against is people being inappropriately defensive about their conspiracy *narratives* when evidence is levelled against them. This gets us to the crux of this friendly disagreement with Stokes. ‘Conspiracy theorising’ is being used ambiguously here. It can, as he notes, refer to a form of narrative, or mode of explanation. Or it can refer to the activity of coming up with a particular conspiracy theory.

We must resist trading on this ambiguity. To theorise about a conspiracy—to wit, to engage in conspiracy theorising—is a different task from hooking into an existing conspiracy narrative to press a point. In the works of the aforementioned historians, we see examples of general worries in a population being expressed as conspiracy narratives. The claim of conspiracy does not come out of genuinely asking ‘Who or what is behind this?’ Rather, some problem is blamed upon a pre-existing conspiracy narrative, one which blames the usual suspects. Now, some will claim that all I am doing here in response to Stokes is to engage in a language game, just like Byford and deHaven-Smith. ‘Oh, we’re not talking about *that kind* of conspiracy theorising when we defend particularism...’ Yet I would argue that by clearly speciating out talk of conspiracy theories with respect to conspiracy theorising and the invocation of conspiracy narratives is principled case of the particularist insisting that we need to work with the evidence. After all, if the evidence is ‘This looks like a redressed version of a Jewish banking conspiracy narrative’, then the appropriate evidential response is

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<sup>25</sup> I take it here that the threshold for accusation here something higher than simply saying ‘*They* are up to something...’ After all, some low level accusation will be inherent to any claim of conspiracy, and we surely want to be able to entertain claims about conspiracies in order to investigate them.

<sup>26</sup> It’s useful here to note that the earliest found mention of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ refers to a ‘recrudescence of the conspiracy theory’ (“conspiracy, n.” 2011), which suggests that even in 1909, people were aware that said theories sometimes ape earlier narratives.

to ask ‘Hasn’t this been debunked?’ Because if it has, then we will have evidence to mount against the new version. If it has not, then we need to investigate the claim further.<sup>27</sup>

That being said, Stokes is right that there is a certain naiveté to any particularist response which handwavingly says evidence will win out. Human beings, unfortunately, do not weigh up claims dispassionately. Maybe we particularists are too inclined to think rational inquiry will save the day, or perhaps we think of such enquiry taking years or even decades. Maybe some of us just downplay certain reoffenders by saying ‘No one takes those theories seriously!’ But note that this is not a fault with particularism. Rather, it’s a fault of particular particularists. Some of us have been hasty in our defence of particularism, but our haste is not a mark against the thesis. It is, instead, a mark against the way in which we have propounded our views, and we should thank Stokes for reminding us to not repeat the errors of the generalist.

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<sup>27</sup> There is the interesting question here of when and how does a conspiracy theory become a conspiracy narrative, or how such narratives might arise outside of the epistemic considerations of conspiracy theorising. Unfortunately, the investigation of that topic will have to wait.

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