

We are all conspiracy theorists now!

Matthew R. X. Dentith

On November 1st, 2001 Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned with the rare, expensive and highly radioactive radionuclide, polonium-210. Litvinenko, a former Russian Federal Security Service was living in exile in London, promoting various conspiracy theories about Vladimir Putin's rise to power in Russia. He had met with two of his former colleagues for tea, and one of his former friends surreptitiously slipped the poison into Litvinenko's teapot.

Death by polonium-210 is slow and painful. Despite being administered a lethal dose – two hundred times the amount required to kill a human being – it took three weeks for Litvinenko to die. On his death bed, Litvinenko accused the Russian Federal Security Service and Foreign Intelligence Service – the successors to the KGB – as well Putin himself, as being involved in a conspiracy to silence him.

Polonium-210 is unusual choice as a poison. Refining or getting access to the radionuclide is so difficult enough that you have to ask why the assassins did not use cheaper, more accessible toxin. Polonium-210 is also an obvious poison, in that its high radioactivity, combined with the fact it was transported in a not-particularly hermetically sealed container, meant that minute traces of the poison could be tracked back to the cab in which the assassins travelled, and the planes and trains they used to get to London from Moscow.

All of this sounds like particularly gripping spy thriller, but truth can be stranger than fiction, since this really happened. So, given what we know about the death of Alexander Litvinenko, it seems certain that his death was the result of a conspiracy. After all, his death had to be plotted by a range of conspirators, who acted in secret. The big question, then, is which conspiracy *theory* is the best explanation?

One option is that Litvinenko was killed by at the behest of the Russian state as a show of power by the Kremlin. However, this is not the only option. Another possibility is that Litvinenko's long and protracted death – which gave him and many other detractors of Putin's regime significant media presence – was ordered by Putin's opponents as a way of discrediting him. Advocates of this particular theory either claim that Litvinenko was a willing participant, or that he was a convenient dupe in a false flag conspiracy to convince the world that Putin would spare no expense when it came to murdering his rivals.

Whatever the case, you cannot help but be a conspiracy theorist about the death of Alexander Litvinenko. To think otherwise just seems mind-boggling.

“But I’m not a conspiracy theorist...”

The term “conspiracy theory” is typically taken to be pejorative and refers to a kind of irrational belief or system of beliefs. Conspiracy theories are frowned upon in public discourse, despite the fact that we know conspiracies occur. So why is it we are so sceptical of theories about conspiracies?

Well, in part it is because we keep being told by people who should know better that conspiracy theories are bunk. Most of the academic literature on the irrationality of belief in conspiracy theories stems from the work Sir Karl Popper or Richard Hofstadter. Popper, in the *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Popper 1969), characterises belief in conspiracy theories as *prima facie* irrational because conspiracy theorists are the kind of people who think history is the result of successive and successful conspiracies. Given that this is not obviously the case, the *conspiracy theory of society*, as Popper dubs it, is obviously false and thus belief in conspiracy theories is irrational as well.

Richard Hofstadter, in his *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Hofstadter 1965), classifies belief in conspiracy theories as being like – but not exactly like – paranoia. This is not intended as a clinical diagnosis. Rather, Hofstadter seeks to provide an explanation as to why we are suspicious of belief in conspiracy theories *generally* by showing how they *resemble* paranoid ideation. If we consider paranoid ideation to be irrational, then belief in conspiracy theories should, by analogy, be irrational as well.

Popper and Hofstadter are the grand old men of academic debate about conspiracy theories, and it is fair to say that they have set the terms: conspiracy theories are typically thought of as being irrational. Versions of their theories can be seen in the contemporary work Cass Sunstein (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009), Daniel Pipes (Pipes 1997), David Aaronovitch (Aaronovitch 2009), and Mark Fenster (Fenster 2008). Yet the theories of Hofstadter and Popper are, when you think about them carefully, kind of weird. After all, both of them admit conspiracies occur, and that it is sometimes rational to believe in theories about them. So, why are we skeptical of conspiracy theories?

Popper and Hofstadter’s interest was on claims of *political* conspiracies, which they both thought of as both rare and seldom successful. They wrote at a time when trust in authority was high and public knowledge about political malfeasance was low. Their views are understandable (even if we think their views are still weird) given the context in which they wrote. To them, talk of conspiracy theories was to be frowned upon, given that if people came to believe such theories, it would be damaging to the public’s trust in authority. However, here-and-now, with our access to official information and the work of organisations like WikiLeaks, the trusting attitudes of Popper and Hofstadter are askew. Our trust in political authority has been rightly challenged by our knowledge of what members of influential organisations routinely do. Some of the processes they follow look conspiratorial, and some of the conspiracy theories which, say, governments have poo-hooed, have turned out to be warranted by the evidence. So, why are we still so sceptical of conspiracy theories, given what we now know?

Another reason for our scepticism of conspiracy theories might be because we all know about the existence of weird conspiracy theorists. From David Icke and his alien, shape-shifting reptiles to Alex Jones and his theories about the true powers behind the White House, there are an awful lot of conspiracy theorists who call into disrepute the class of beliefs we call “conspiracy theories”. However, this should not be thought of as a reason for thinking that belief in conspiracy theories itself is suspicious or irrational. It would be a little bit like characterising theism solely with respect to the beliefs of religious fanatics, or atheism solely with respect to the views of someone like Richard Dawkins. If we start our analysis with respect to beliefs we are already suspicious of, then we are going to confirm our pejorative take. Instead, we should focus our attention on the class of conspiratorial activity *in general* – actions taken by plotters in secret towards some end – and ask whether there is a lot of conspiratorial activity which is well-evidenced and the subject of conspiracy theories? Criminal conspiracies are routinely prosecuted through the courts, for example. If you are historically literate, then you will be aware that history is littered with examples of theories about conspiracies, some of which were warranted. If you consider yourself to be politically literate, then you might even claim that a large amount of contemporary politicking takes place in a conspiratorial mode, whether it be selling a policy to the public, working out when to stage a leadership coup or getting rid of your enemies.

The Moscow Trials

When is a conspiracy theory not a conspiracy theory? When it’s not a conspiracy theory (the accepted wisdom tells us)! Take, for example, the Moscow Trials of the 1930s. Joseph Stalin, the then leader of the USSR, was obsessed that his rival (in exile) Leon Trotsky was conspiring to return to Russia to depose him. When the security police told Stalin there was no evidence of a conspiracy by Trotsky and his sympathisers, Stalin told them to ensure there would be. Thus, over several months, evidence was fabricated and people were “persuaded” to testify in a series of trials that Trotsky was a threat because he was conspiring against the USSR.

The Moscow Trials were public, and thus concerned citizens (admittedly mostly outside of the USSR) pored over the details. John Dewey, a philosopher, educationalist and Trotskyite, formed the *Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (or “The Dewey Commission”). The result of the commission was a report which included in it the claim that the verdicts in the Moscow Trials were a sham and the result of a conspiracy by senior members of the Communist Party. Stalin and his cronies countered and argued that the Commission’s report was a campaign of disinformation (inadvertently coining a term which would be used for all time to come when debating conspiracy theories). However, after Stalin’s death Nikita Khrushchev, the new leader of the USSR, admitted that the Dewey Commission was largely right: Stalin wanted the alleged sympathisers of Leon Trotsky to be found guilty to prove the existence of a non-existent conspiracy by Trotsky to return to Russia. If anything, Stalin and his cronies were the vapid conspiracy theorists, whilst the conspiracy theory put forward by the members of the Dewey Commission was warranted.

What are we to make of this? Well, at the time, the Dewey Commission’s claims were not just pooh-poohed by the USSR but also the governments of the USA and the UK. England and America trusted Stalin’s assurances the trials were free and fair and thus believed in what turned out to be a conspiracy theory. So, was it a mistake to call the Dewey Commission’s thesis about

the validity of the verdicts in the Moscow Trials a conspiracy theory at the time? This is an awkward question, one which points towards a certain problem with talk of conspiracy theories generally: if we reserve the term to only to refer to theories which are, by definition, irrational to believe, then cases where it turns out that belief in them was not irrational suddenly needs explaining in non-conspiracy theory terms. This is the kind of metaphysical trap that Charles Fort would have loved: a conspiracy theory is not a conspiracy theory when its an official theory about a conspiracy *even if it was called a conspiracy theory in the first place*.

The moral of the Moscow Trials is that sometimes governments conspire against their citizenry, and that the only viable explanation of that fact is a conspiracy theory. Sometimes, though, governments conspire with their unwitting citizenry.

The Abstract Expressionism of the CIA

When people talk about the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), we tend to think of a secretive group, mostly made up of grey-suited workers who work long hours, have no hobbies, and spy upon almost everyone. However, back in the Forties CIA agents were much more eclectic. Some of them liked to drink hard, write novels in their spare time, and collect art. This latter interest led some members of the CIA to develop the “long leash”: the secretive funding of artistic endeavours for the purposes of showing that America was culturally superior to its rivals, particularly the USSR, with whom it was engaging in a Cold War.

One of the art movements funded in this manner was Abstract Expressionism. The CIA set up fronts to promote the work of people like Jackson Pollock overseas, for the purposes of promoting American art and culture. It might be tempting, then, to say that Abstract Expressionism was simply part of the CIA’s arsenal in the Cold War. However, it is clear that the Abstract Expressionists themselves had no idea that some of their funding – and initial success – was coming from the CIA. As far the Abstract Expressionists were concerned, their art was being appreciated on its own merits. Which it was, garnering critical acclaim from the right quarters, being bought by the right institutions, and the like. Although the CIA promoted Abstract Expressionism as part of their cultural arsenal in the Cold War, the conspiracy also resulted in the mainstreaming of the Abstract Expressionist art movement *in its own right*. This must have been one of the desired ends of the CIA agents who ran the long leash: the preeminence of Abstract Expressionism at that time allowed Americans generally to say that their own, homegrown art could compete, culturally, with that of the older European and Soviet nations.

The story of the initial success of Abstract Expressionism shows that conspiracy theories need not be about political affairs with huge ramifications. It also demonstrates that conspiracies themselves need not be necessarily nefarious: the secret patronage of the Abstract Expressionist movement might be the kind of thing we consider suspicious (like most secretive activity) but it is not inherently sinister. The benefit of analysing examples like the long leash is that it allows us examine the wider class of conspiratorial explanations which are necessarily sinister (unless you were a Soviet art critic), that we are inclined to think about seriously. The long leash, after all, is an example of a conspiracy. Any theories about it will turn out to be conspiracy theories, including the role of the long leash in the initial success of Abstract Expressionism. It just turns out that in this case the conspiracy theories happen to be based upon evidence and are, thus, warranted.

The examples of the deaths of Alexander Litvinenko, the Moscow Trials and the Long Leash, then, show that conspiracy theories should be taken seriously, *no matter our view of wacky conspiracy theorists like David Icke and Alex Jones*. So, what are we to do when more than conspiracy theories collide, like they do with respect to the events of September 11th, 2001?

The 9/11 Conspiracy Theories

On September the 11th, 2001, a terrorist attack destroyed the Twin Towers in New York and was responsible for an attack on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. According to most commentators, the terrorist organisation Al Qaeda planned and carried out the attack. However a small but vocal set of conspiracy theorists, most commonly known as the “9/11 Truthers”, claim that, variously, the real culprits were either a foreign nation operating under a false flag, or that the attack was carried out on the orders of elements within the government of the USA.

Whatever you believe about 9/11, it is likely that believe a conspiracy theory. Either Al Qaeda operatives worked in secret to attack mainland America, or some other organisation let the blame fall on Al Qaeda. No matter which theory you believe, it turns out you are a conspiracy theorist about 9/11. What matters here, then, is the evidence you use to justify your choice of conspiracy theory, and this is the general moral for the appraisal of any conspiracy theory: any given conspiracy theory is only as good as the evidence which supports this. If we are going to be sceptical of conspiracy theories, then let that scepticism be based upon arguments as to why particular conspiracy theories are or are not very good. After all, sometimes our only choice is between competing conspiracy theories.

Some will undoubtedly try to argue that their acceptance of the Al Qaeda theory for the events of 9/11 is not a conspiracy theory because it is now part of our orthodox history. However, that gets us back to the metaphysical trap: when is a conspiracy theory not a conspiracy theory? For example, in the moments between the attacks on New York on September the 11th and Al Qaeda taking responsibility for the atrocity, every theory about the cause of the destruction of the Twin Towers was a conspiracy theory. It was only when evidence came to light that Al Qaeda had claimed responsibility for it that one of the conspiracy theories was considered plausible. Prior to that point people had their suspicions, but they were still suspicions based on the likelihood of one conspiracy theory being more plausible than some other.

Conclusion

Why are so sceptical about conspiracy theories? Why are we so scared of being called a conspiracy theorist, such that we often say “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but...”? Conspiracies occur, and no one seems to deny that. Conspiracy theories sometimes turn out to be warranted, although many people deny that by saying “Ah, but then it’s not really a conspiracy theory, is it?” Our suspicion about conspiracy theories looks to be, to paraphrase the philosopher Charles Pigden, a modern superstition (Pigden 2007) or, as Lee Basham puts it, a mark of a kind of civil religion (Basham 2006). We have been told that conspiracy theories are bunk and so we treat

them as such. Some conspiracy theorists, like David Icke and Alex Jones, might argue that this is because the people who keep telling us this are the ones with the most to gain. After all, in a world where conspirators can hide behind the line "That's just a conspiracy theory!" much conspiratorial activity will likely go unchecked. Still, even if you do not think we live in a totally conspired world, it's clear that sometimes theories about conspiracies are rational to believe.

Bibliography

- Aaronvitch, D. (2009). Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History. London, Jonathan Cape.
- Basham, L. (2006). Afterthoughts on Conspiracy Theory: Resilience and Ubiquity. Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate. D. Coady. Hampshire, England, Ashgate.
- Fenster, M. (2008). Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Hofstadter, R. (1965). The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays. New York, Knopf.
- Pigden, C. R. (2007). "Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom." Episteme 4(2): 219-232.
- Pipes, D. (1997). Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From. New York, Free Press.
- Popper, K. R. (1969). The Open Society and Its Enemies. London and Henley, Routledge Kegan Paul.
- Sunstein, C. R. and A. Vermeule (2009). "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures." Journal of Political Philosophy 17(2): 202-227.