



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

The Iniquity of the Conspiracy Inquirers

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Dentith, M R. X. 2019. "The Iniquity of the Conspiracy Inquirers." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (8): 1-11. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4hQ>.

In late 2017, I approached the publishers Rowman and Littlefield with a proposal for a book on the latest work on conspiracy theory theory (the study of conspiracy theory), which would take as its basis a series of replies and counters to an opinion piece first published in *Le Monde*. “Luttions efficacement contre les théories du complot” (Bronner et al. 2016) was the work of Gérard Bronner, Véronique Campion-Vincent, Sylvain Delouvé, Sebastian Dieguez, Karen Douglas, Nicolas Gauvrit, Anthony Lantian, and Pascal Wagner-Egger, and it set in motion a fascinating commentary on the rationality of conspiracy theory in the pages of the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*.

What’s Past is Prologue

Given the nature of these exchanges, I had hoped that Bronner et al. would contribute to the edited volume. After all (sans Karen Douglas) they had responded to an open letter written by Lee Basham and myself (Basham and Dentith 2016), which had been signed by a number of philosophers, sociologists, and a psychologist (Dieguez et al. 2016). However, as an email from Sebastian Dieguez stated, none of the authors wanted to take part in said project (*pers comms*).

As such, I was surprised that several months after the publication of *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously* (M. R. X. Dentith 2018b) some of the original authors of the original *Le Monde* piece decided to respond after all. Pascal Wagner-Egger, Gérard Bronner, Sylvain Delouvé, Sebastian Dieguez, and Nicolas Gauvrit (not only sans Karen Douglas, but now also Anthony Lantian and Véronique Campion-Vincent) wrote a piece entitled “Why ‘Healthy Conspiracy Theories’ Are (Oxy)morons” (Wagner-Egger et al. 2019). I was even more surprised by the incoherence of the piece in question, in part because of internal contradictions in their own arguments, but also because they mischaracterised my own work (and not for the first time). If I was a suspicious person I would have put this down to malice. Yet not being suspicious I also cannot fathom how serious academics as themselves would fail to check their own work before committing it to publication.

“Weapons of Massive Destructions”

Let me start with a simple error. Wagner-Egger, et al. claim that: “If we did not miss any other, Basham and Dentith cite only one (!) conspiracy theory that turned out to be true: the US/UK Weapons of Massive [sic] Destructions [sic]” (Wagner-Egger et al. 2019, 51). I do not even need to state this is false, because they almost immediately follow that sentence with the following parenthetical: “(Basham & Dentith enumerate for example the beginnings of holocaust, Stalin, US army in Vietnam, the Watergate, or Litvinenko case[!])” (Wagner-Egger et al. 2019, 51).

So, which is it? Do we state only one warranted conspiracy theory (a claim which is false) or many (a claim which is true)?¹

¹ Even odder is their claim this the “main” argument for “healthy conspiracy theorizing” is the “US/UK Weapons of Mass Destruction” conspiracy theory: I, for one, am more likely in my cited works to use the

This is all the more confusing as earlier on in their piece they seem to deny that the “US/UK Weapons of Mass Destructions” theory is a conspiracy theory *at all*. They write that said conspiracy theory:

[A]ccused US and UK armies to have invaded Iraq in 2003, not as they claim because of the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction—**which were finally not found, and led the US and UK governments to recognize their "error"** [emphasis added]—but in reality, to gain control on a strategic region for oil industry (Wagner-Egger et al. 2019, 50).

Behold here a rewriting of history in order to make a theory about a conspiracy disappear. Those who are politically literate will be doubtlessly aware that part-and-parcel of the rationale for the invasion of Iraq in 2003^{ACE} was the creation of a doctored (sometimes called “dodgy”) dossier by the British which sought to show that—despite not just a lack of evidence on the ground but also the assurances of UN Weapons Inspectors—that there really were Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) in Iraq. It was not that these weapons were “finally not found” which led the US and the UK to “recognize their ‘error’.” It was that these two governments manufactured consent through the production of fake evidence. Now, you can dispute how conspiratorial this dodgy dossier was: for some the dossier is clear evidence that the *Plan for a New American Century* was going according to schedule; others have argued that UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George W. Bush really did think they would find the WMDs and thought once they were found the creation of the dossier would be but a footnote.²

What you probably should not do is rewrite history to make the problem of the “US/UK Weapons of Mass Destructions” conspiracy theory disappear, and you certainly should not claim it is the only example we used when you almost immediately admit we cited others as well.

You shouldn’t also present it both as a conspiracy theory which is true, and not a conspiracy theory at all, but *c’est la vie*.

Indeed, given Wagner-Egger, et al. list of the supposed inadequacies of conspiracy theorists, which they associate with the errors of conspiracist ideation, you could view this sloppy kind of argument as a special kind of conspiracism, one suffered by a certain kind of conspiracy theory theorist (someone who studies conspiracy theory) who steadfastly sticks to some view despite the very evidence they present in favour of it indicating otherwise. Indeed, given the issue of how they mischaracterise my work, maybe the real problem with conspiracism is it is

Moscow Show Trials as chief example, whilst Lee Basham likes to talk about the Gulf of Tonkin Affair, or the Atomic Energy Commission covering up the dangers of atomic testing. Charles Pigden is fond of Elizabethan plots, and so forth. So, to say this one conspiracy theory is the main argument is to ignore our actual main arguments.

² This version of the story can be finessed even further by claiming that Bush and Blair preferred the findings of certain intelligence agency senior officials over that of staff on the ground. However, given what happened, charity seems an unnecessary virtue.

rooted in part of the community of conspiracy theory theorists, rather than amongst conspiracy theorists *per se*...

Public Conspiracy Theories

Let us, for the moment, ignore Wagner-Eggers, et al. and their confused view on the “US/UK Weapons of Mass Destruction” conspiracy theory, or that they think their critics only give one example or many. After all, Wagner-Egger also add to the list of warranted conspiracy theories, noting that they would: “[A]dd the MK-Ultra project, Tuskegee experiments, the Tobacco conspiracy, etc.)” (Wagner-Egger et al. 2019, 51).

But they then go on to say:

As Popper underlined, successful conspiracies are rare in history (16). Moreover, and this is a crucial point, all these proved conspiracies *did not rely on preceding public conspiracy theories*. They were discovered by genuine journalistic, police or judicial investigations. Thus, at best, we know very few conspiracy theories that became true (Wagner-Egger et al. 2019, 51).

The claim these “did not rely on preceding public conspiracy theories” is an odd one. If we accept that by saying they would add to *our* list, then several of the warranted conspiracy theories we presented were preceded by public conspiracy theories.

Now, let us pause a moment and try to work out what they mean by “public conspiracy theories.” What they seem to be intimating here is the claim none of these warranted conspiracy theories existed in a pre-warranted state: that is, the conspiracy theories in question first appeared in public discourse as warranted.

This is not true, however. Leaving to one side the “US/UK Weapons of Mass Destruction” conspiracy theory³), the Moscow Show Trials (presumably the target of their reference to “Stalin”) are a problem for them. After all, the *Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (also known as “The Dewey Commission”) may well have been made up of educated people, but the findings were labeled both “disinformation” and a “conspiracy theory” (of the unwarranted kind) by both the West and Russia (at least until Stalin’s death). The Watergate Affair was also laughed at by the media and politicians for years before becoming a respectable thing to believe about what happened at the Watergate Hotel. The Iran-Contra Affair is another example of a warranted conspiracy theory where journalists (like Robert Parry) and politicians (such as John Kerry) were smeared for spreading the story both before *and after* it was taken to be well-established.

Perhaps what Wagner-Egger, et al. really mean by “public conspiracy theory” is that none of the theories in question publicly circulated as conspiracy theories before being shown to be

³ A warranted conspiracy theory long before the governments of the US and UK admitted to having misled the public over the non-existence of WMDs in Iraq circa 2003 ACE.

true. That seems to be the only way to make sense of their standard, but this is surely worse. That means that if anyone suspected the conspiracies before they were made “public,” then any belief in such theories before the “proper” investigations were undertaken would just automatically be rendered as false. Which means that, somehow, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were vapid conspiracy theorists at one stage of the investigation in the Watergate Affair, but warranted conspiracy “inquirers” at some latter point. Meanwhile, Robert Parry would have had the distinction of being both being a vapid and warranted investigator into some conspiracy theory, given that once the Iran-Contra story broke, people still continued to cast doubt about it.

This is an example of building in a pejorative definition of “conspiracy theory” into an argument, rather than working with a value neutral definition. They restrict the domain of *warranted* conspiracy theories to a small number, in order to get to Karl Popper’s argument about the irrationality of belief in the *conspiracy theory of society* which has—as a central tenet—the claim that conspiracies are rare and seldom successful (Popper 1969). That is, there are few warranted cases of conspiracy, and thus conspiracy theories will greatly outnumber them.

Now, in one sense they are right: there are (probably) more unwarranted than warranted conspiracy theories because—as a rule—there are usually more unwarranted theories than there are warranted ones generally. In the Sciences, for example, new scientific theories are generated pretty much constantly, but only a small proportion of them survive scrutiny. The same is true in the social sciences (like, say, psychology), and the Arts (historical theories are proposed all the time, but not all historical theses end up being widely accepted). As such, Wagner-Egger, et al. might be right, but only in a really trivial sense. But if we accept this trivial sense of unwarranted theories outnumbering warranted theories as a serious issue, then it is a serious issue for all theories, and not just *conspiracy* theories.

Which is why we should talk about the salience of examples, rather than the number of them. As Wagner-Egger, et al. would seem to admit, there are a number of conspiracy theories which have turned out to be true, and many of these conspiracy theories concerned governmental malfeasance. Which, unless you think governmental malfeasance is a good thing, is something we ought to be on the look out for. A healthy democracy requires vigilance, after all.

Occam and Hanlon’s Razors

Part-and-parcel of Wagner-Eggers, et al. argument about the unhealthy nature of conspiracy theorising is a weird insistence on how we should apply Occam and Hanlon’s Razors. Occam’s Razor says we should prefer the least complicated explanation, *all things being equal*, whilst Hanlon’s Razor counsels us to never ascribe to malice what could be explained by a cock-up.

Both Occam and Hanlon are useful guides for choosing between competing theories or views in situations where we have to make quick decisions. They are, however, heuristics,

and not fundamental laws of argument. Yet Wagner-Egger misrepresent them, saying: “[B]y virtue of the scientific principle of *Occam’s razor*, simpler hypotheses **have always to be preferred** [Emphasis mine] to more complicated ones in order to explain any phenomenon” (Wagner-Egger et al. 2019, 52). Yet the Razors are *ceteris paribus* clauses: we apply them in cases of “all other things being equal” rather than in *all* cases.

This is an important point: Occam’s Razor, for example, says we should prefer simpler explanations over complex explanations *in cases where the more complicated explanation offers no significant advantages*. If a rival, more complicated explanation also has the explanatory virtue of explaining new and novel phenomena, for example, or makes unique and testable predictions, then we might well have grounds to prefer the more complicated theory. Indeed, the story of how we moved from one theoretical model in physics to another over the course of the 20th century is wrapped up in accepting that much more complicated physical models (at least compared to their predecessors) ended up also being richer theoretical models with respect to solving existing physical puzzles, whilst also successfully predicting novel phenomena.

Now, it may be the case that some conspiracy theories are more complex explanations than their rivals, although it is not clear this is always the case: the coincidence theory, for example, that says the various pro-Brexit campaigns did not collude with one another in the run-up to the Brexit referendum in the UK seems to require several leaps of faith, leaps which makes such an explanation much more complicated and unwieldy than thinking certain key figures in the campaign conspired to get around campaign finance rules. But even in cases where a conspiracy theory is more complicated than some rival explanation it might still be the best explanation (as it was in the case of the Moscow Trials: Stalin and his cronies really did engineer the verdicts in the trial despite the Soviet claim at the time the simplest explanation was that they really had uncovered a Trotskyist plot).

In the same respect, Hanlon’s Razor says we should never attribute to malice what can be explained by stupidity *all things being equal*. If we were to take Hanlon’s Razor as a prescription we would never be able to justify any claim of malicious conspiracy because, well, we should just assume the supposed conspirators were stupid. Thus, Stalin and his cronies—when they engineered the guilty verdicts in the Moscow Trials—were, according to Wagner-Egger and co. it seems, merely *stupidly and coincidentally* getting people to perjure themselves on the witness stand (which, I might remind you, lead to the death of many of them), rather than maliciously creating the appearance of a conspiracy against Stalin and his regime in order to justify more political purges.

Occam and Hanlon’s Razors are guides. They are not stipulations. They are employed in order to help us to make quick decisions in the absence of having to do a lot of cognitive work. They should not be seen as prescriptive.

Yet this is not the only mischaracterisation of a position they engage in ...

Communities of Inquiry

According to Wagner-Egger, et al., in the final chapter of *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, I: “[A]bandon the concepts of conspiracy theory (and theorizing) in favor of ‘communities of inquiry,’ which is close to what we called here conspiracy inquiry (Wagner-Egger et al. 2019, 61). Before I explain why this is not only not true, but gross misrepresentation of my work, let me explain what it is they mean by “conspiracy inquiry.”

Wagner-Egger, et al. think that healthy conspiracy theorising (the position they ascribe to the participating authors of *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*) is an oxy-moron because:

[C]onspiracy theories may in our view be defined as irrational suspicions of conspiracy based on errant data about the official version (“negative” clues). They are opposed to (conspiracy) inquiries, which possibly prove the existence of a particular conspiracy (with once again sound journalistic or judicial investigations, and positive proofs of the conspiracy such as confessions, official documents, leaks, whistleblowers, etc.; note that these proofs could be also in principle brought by non professionals, but perhaps with less likelihood) (Wagner-Egger et al. 2019, 60–61).

That is, it is unhealthy to theorise about conspiracies, but it can be healthy to inquire into them.

Put simply like that, this is obviously nonsense. To achieve their distinction they have to construct a portrait of the conspiracy theorist as a poorly-served figure both epistemically and psychologically, whilst offering paeans to a class of persons who apparently inquire into conspiracies properly. That is, they retroactively justify their suspicion of these things called “conspiracy theories” by looking for evidence conspiracy theorists are irrational.

I have argued as to why this move effectively means working backwards elsewhere (see, for example, my chapter in “Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them” (2018a)) but, in short, starting work with a pejorative gloss of either “conspiracy theory” or “conspiracy theorist” prejudices our theoretical work by building into it the notion belief in conspiracy theories is *prima facie* irrational. Our work would be much more fruitful (and less determined by unexamined “common sense notions”) if we started with a value-neutral definition of “conspiracy theory” that admitted that, yes, some conspiracy theorising can be healthy.

After all, it is not as if my colleagues think all conspiracy theorising is healthy; just that some of it is, contra the claims of our critics (who think we have *prima facie* grounds to be suspicious of conspiracy theories generally). We simply think you can’t assume a conspiracy theory is suspicious just because it is (or has been labelled) a conspiracy theory.

So, to claim that I also advocate something close to this approach goes against my published research. Due to reservations about the back-to-front way in which authors like Wagner-

Eggers, et al. define conspiracy theorising and conspiracy theorists (given they seem to start with the notion conspiracy theories are irrational to believe by definition, and thus seek evidence to show that conspiracy theorists must thus be acting irrationally if they believe conspiracy theories), I do not share their pejorative take on conspiracy theorists or conspiracy theorising. Inquiring into a conspiracy is to theorise about a conspiracy, and vice versa.

More galling, however, is that their claim that I seem to have abandoned the concepts of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorising is also clearly denied by the very chapter they are referring to. For example, I ask: “What motivates the investigation of a conspiracy theory” (2018c, 218)? and go on to talk about that investigation, arguing that: “[F]ew—if any—of us have the requisite expertise to assess any given particular conspiracy theory fully anyway” (2018c, 218).

When I speak of inquiries I speak of *communities of inquiry*: “After all, any community of inquiry into a particular conspiracy theory needs to be made up of not just diverse people with respect to things like expertise but also with regard to their attitudes towards conspiracy theories” (2018c, 221–2).

This talk of a *community of inquiry* owes itself to the work of John Dewey (1938) and C. S. Pierce (1958), and by it I am referring to a collective way to investigate conspiracy theories, one which allows us to share the epistemic load of taking such theories seriously enough to want to understand whether they are warranted or unwarranted. It is a method to inquire into these things called “conspiracy theories” and not, as Wagner-Egger, et al. would have you believe, an attempt to move away from talk of conspiracy theory generally. Indeed, as I state near the end of the chapter: “Taking conspiracy theories seriously and investigating them does not tell us that a given community of inquiry will end up endorsing any particular conspiracy theory. It simply tells us that they might” (2018c, 224).

So, whilst I talk about *communities of inquiry* I talk about them inquiring *into conspiracy theories*. There is no way to read that chapter (or the other chapters I authored or co-authored in the same volume) which suggests *in anyway* that I am *abandoning* talk of conspiracy theory or conspiracy theorising in favour of Wagner-Egger’s notion of “conspiracy inquiries.”

This is not, unfortunately, the first time these authors have mischaracterised my work. In an earlier piece they wrote that I seemed “very worried by those he calls ‘conspiracists’” (Dieguez et al. 2016, 26), referring to my paper “The Problem of Conspiracism.” Yet, as Martin Orr and I noted in our reply to that piece (2017), it seems like they had not read the article in question, given I state:

It might also be the case that once we investigate Conspiracism, it will turn out to be a fairly useless thesis, especially if there are not many (if any) actual conspiracists. However, if we are going to treat the thesis of Conspiracism seriously—and investigate it—we need to keep in mind that conspiracists are simply one kind of conspiracy theorist. The putative existence of such

conspiracists does not tell us that belief in conspiracy theories generally is problematic. The question should be “When, if ever, is a conspiracy theorist a conspiracist?” rather than presupposing that conspiracy theorists suffer from conspiracist ideation (Dentith 2018, 341).

Hardly the words of someone who is “very worried” about conspiracists or conspiracism. As I said earlier in the article, if I was suspicious then I would take this as malicious: an attempt to make it look as if my work is inconsistent. Yet it is also hard to imagine that Wagner-Egger, et al. would not at least check to see if their reading or characterisation of another academic’s work is right. It is also not the case I was the only person whose work was mischaracterised: they did the same to Ginna Husting and Martin Orr (2017, 10), as well as Kurtis Hagen (2017).

Robust academic debate requires both sides to engage with one another in good faith. Misrepresenting the opposing side does not inspire confidence in one’s critique.

Of course, it suits Wagner-Egger, et al. to suggest that I am abandoning conspiracy theory in favour of conspiracy inquiry because if it can be shown that a someone like me is giving up on “healthy conspiracy theorising,” then they can let their readers assume that it is our project which is the one running into problems. So, let us turn the tables a little.

Given Wagner-Egger, et al. are responding to *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously* as a whole, and the final chapter where I sketch out a community of inquiry approach to investigating conspiracy theories, surely it is they who are giving up ground. Indeed, the tenor of their replies⁴ since Lee Basham and I penned the joint letter (2016) has gone from condemning even asking questions about conspiracy theories (Bronner et al. 2016), to then claiming “We were just asking questions” (Dieguez et al. 2016) to now saying “Well, *inquiring* into claims of conspiracy is probably okay...” (Wagner-Egger et al. 2019).

As such, it is they who seem to be abandoning their previous position on conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorising, using that common tactic to a certain class of conspiracy theory theorist: renaming a key term in order to make their position look principled. We have seen this before: Lance deHaven-Smith did this with his notion of the “State Crimes Against Democracy” (AKA the SCAD), which was an attempt to avoid the pejorative gloss of “conspiracy theory” by renaming the conspiracy theories he thought we ought to take seriously as SCADs (2013). However, as deHaven-Smith later came to admit, this tactic was not fruitful. As he argues: “A better approach may be to avoid trying to find an acceptable name and definition for illegitimate or criminal *forms of political intrigue*, and instead develop criteria and procedures for identifying *specific events*?” (2013).

⁴ As Lee Basham notes, each reply they write seems to lose a few members from the original consortium which wrote the *Le Monde* piece (2019), which maybe suggests some people have been willing to accept genuine criticism of their views with good grace.

After all, changing the label on a thing or practice does not change that thing or practice. Years ago the Government of Aotearoa New Zealand and a consortium of kiwifruit growers tried to rebrand the kiwifruit to “Zespri” in order to make it more marketable. Yet everyone still knew what a “Zespri” was: it was a kiwifruit.⁵ In the same respect, labelling the kind of conspiracy theorising you approve of as being a “conspiracy inquiry” does not change the fact someone is still theorising about a conspiracy...

The “Conspiracism” of the Conspiracy Theory Theorists

The academic scholarship on conspiracy theory theory is still young, and it is understandable that certain theorists are interested in protecting their research findings in the face of growing body of evidence which indicates that certain central assumptions inherent to that research ought to be questioned. As such, perhaps we should rethink conspiracism not as a fault inherent to conspiracy theorists but, rather, a puzzling attitude held by a certain class of conspiracy theory theorist, those who incoherently argue for the claim conspiracy theorising is unhealthy.

I jest, but I think the point is clear: if you are arguing that healthy conspiracy theorising is a problem, then you ought to ensure that your own views are not also problematic. That is, you should ensure that the faults you ascribe to conspiracy theorists are not also faults in your own arguments and views. After all, like the unhealthy conspiracy theorists they are so concerned with, Wagner-Eggers, et al. defame the innocent (their repeated mischaracterisation of the views of people they disagree with), they argue incoherently (they claim their critics use only one, yet also many examples of warranted conspiracy theories), they cherry-pick evidence to support their views (their version of WMD story of the invasion of Iraq), they ignore the work of experts (the UN Weapons Inspectors) and prefer partisan sources (US and UK government officials). As such, they can be seen to be the ones contributing to a degenerating research programme, which speaks to their characterisation of “unhealthy conspiracy theorizing” simply being a projection of their own conspiracism, rather than a consequence of actually following the evidence.

We surely should expect better. As someone well-versed in the conspiracy theory theory literature, I am aware that many of my colleagues who are concerned about the negative consequences of belief in conspiracy theories have principled objections to the kind of work that *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously* represents. Indeed, these objections are being hashed out in articles as well as collaborative work; many of us are friends enough to enjoy a drink together even if we push back strongly at each other’s work in print. That is because we trust that—despite academic disagreement on conspiracy theory—we will honestly and sincerely critique each other’s arguments, rather than mischaracterise the work. In this respect Wager-Eggers, et al. need to do better.

⁵ Non-New Zealand readers might well know the “kiwifruit” as a “kiwi.” However, that is the name of our national bird (which some of you will know as a “kiwi bird”). Names and labels are strange, and changing them mid-stream without really good motivation rarely works.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Martin Orr for helpful feedback on this article.

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