Chapter 6

Conspiracy Theories and Philosophy

Bringing the Epistemology of a Freighted Term into the Social Sciences

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A notable feature about the study of things we call *conspiracy theories* is both how large and fragmented the literature is. This has led to the development of a number of different, often disparate research programs, largely as a result of scholars applying their own theoretical presuppositions to a largely interdisciplinary topic. [[1]](#endnote-1)

However, many of these research programs are not easily reconcilable with each other, and this is a problem—I argue—which needs resolution. Just how we resolve the issue is, I think, simple, but the consequences may have repercussions for existing research programs which some scholars might find hard to stomach.

Now, despite the disparity in these existing research programs, most scholars agree that conspiracy theories are *theories* about *conspiracies*. Where we have tended to differ typically hinges on whether there is something more to a conspiracy theory than it *merely* being a theory about a conspiracy. These views fit the following (rough) classification:

Conspiracy theories are prima facie false.

Conspiracy theories are not prima facie false, but there is something about such theories which makes them suspicious

Conspiracy theories are neither prima facie false nor typically suspicious.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The first two options are what have been come to be known in philosophy as “generalist views” or *generalism*.[[3]](#endnote-3) Generalists claim we have justification for a general, prima facie suspicion of conspiracy theories. That is, given that conspiracy theories are either false, or most of them are suspect, we have grounds to treat the class of *conspiracy theories* dismissively.

The third option is what we might term *particularism*;[[4]](#endnote-4) when appraising any conspiracy theory we have to assess it on its particular (read: evidential) merits, rather than treat it dismissively just because it has been labeled a conspiracy theory.

Much of the *apparent* disagreement in the literature—I argue (and have argued elsewhere; see *The Problem of Conspiracism*[[5]](#endnote-5))—hinges upon which option we choose. In this chapter I will demonstrate that our choices end up restricting our ability to analyze these things called conspiracy theories. Not just that, but they also prove to be problematic *generally*, restricting the kind of examples of what counts as a conspiracy theory, thus limiting our analyses from the outset. To illustrate this, let us look at each of these options in turn.

Option 1:Conspiracy Theories as Prima Facie False

Some scholars—admittedly not many—treat conspiracy theories as prima facie false and thus by extension irrational to believe.

For example, Viren Swami et al. define conspiracy theories as “a subset of **false beliefs** [emphasis mine] in which the ultimate cause of an event is believed to be due to a plot by multiple actors working together with a clear goal in mind, often unlawfully and in secret.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Or there is Daniel Pipes, who characterizes belief in conspiracy theories as a “fear of **nonexistent** [emphasis mine] conspiracies. *Conspiracy* refers to an act, *conspiracy theory* to a perception.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

Pipes here is aping the work of Richard Hofstadter who, in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, discusses how *certain* conspiracy theorists see conspiracies as *the* motive force in history, which is “set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power[.]”[[8]](#endnote-8) However, this mode of thinking is a paranoid *style,* not an actual clinical diagnosis of psychological paranoia; it is analogous to paranoid ideation but—crucially—not actual paranoia. Pipes, however, characterizes belief in conspiracy theories as fantastical, and so ends up treating the *paranoid style* as something akin to a clinical diagnosis of paranoid ideation on the part of the conspiracy theorist. Pipes is not alone in this; see also the work of Gordon Arnold*[[9]](#endnote-9)* and Hannah Darwin et al.*[[10]](#endnote-10)*

Numerous scholars have adopted Hofstadter’s view explicitly. Joseph DiGrazia, for example, endorses Hofstadter’s paranoid-style analysis of belief in conspiracy theories.[[11]](#endnote-11) Michael Barkun also approvingly cites Hofstadter in his book *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*.[[12]](#endnote-12) Meanwhile, Marvin Zonis and Craig T. Joseph—while not explicitly citing Hofstadter—also run a paranoid-style type of analysis in *Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East*, claiming “[c]onspiracy thinking is isomorphic with, although not identical to, paranoia.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

Peter Knight, however, argues that treating the analogy that underpins the paranoid style *literally* is self-defeating, given that it rests upon claiming both belief in conspiracy theories is paranoid, and paranoid people believe conspiracy theories.[[14]](#endnote-14) As I have argued in *The Problem of Conspiracism*, the problem with conflating cases of *putative* irrational conspiracy theorizing (often labeled as “conspiracist”) with the wider array of conspiracy theorizing we find out in the world gets the scholarly analysis back-to-front. [[15]](#endnote-15) We cannot infer anything interesting about the nature of belief in conspiracy theories if we only look at the class of people we have *predetermined* as believing such theories irrationally.

We should never operate with definitions that presume the answer to our research questions. Now, we could be charitable and say that scholars who operate with such definitions come to them as a *result* of their research: on examination, each and every conspiracy theory has been false (and thus by extension irrational to believe).

Now, aside from an inductive problem (how can we be sure the next conspiracy theory we research will turn out to be false?) there is no need to bake in any stipulation that conspiracy theories are *necessarily* false. After all, it is no threat to claim a conspiracy theory *could be true*, even if we lived in a world in which all investigated conspiracy theories have been false. After all, it is *logically possible* that some theory about a conspiracy *could* be true. Indeed, the fact we live in a world where at least one conspiracy theory has turned out to be true, the stipulation seems at best naïve, and at worst stupid.

After all, what do scholars like Pipes or Swami make of conspiracy theories that not only turned out to be true but were rational to believe *at the time*? Take, for example, the conspiracy theories about the Moscow Show Trials in the 1930s, or the Gulf of Tonkin incident in the 1960s. These are cases of cover-ups where members of influential institutions really did conspire to keep the truth of their actions secret from the public. Not just that, they unjustly and insincerely labeled their detractors as *conspiracy theorists*.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Now, you could claim the conspiracy theorists in these cases were only accidentally right, or, more plausibly, the theory labeled “conspiracy” was never a conspiracy theory in the first place (a point we will return to later). But with respect to the possibility conspiracy theorists were only accidentally right, we can show, with respect to the Moscow Show Trials of the 1930s and the Gulf of Tonkin Incident of the 1960s, that said theorists offered plausible arguments and evidence for their conspiracy theories *at the time,* yet had their warranted conclusions dismissed *merely* because they were “conspiracy theorists” peddling “conspiracy theories.” These examples are but the tip of an iceberg of warranted conspiracy theories that were dismissed because we were told conspiracy theorists and their theories should not be believed.

Given how implausible it is to argue that conspiracy theories are necessarily false, scholars of this persuasion—I argue—should shift their operating definition to one which *merely* claims said theories are suspicious. However, as we are about to see, this stipulation turns out to be just as problematic.

Suspicious Conspiracy Theories

Most scholars—to be fair—do not treat conspiracy theories as *necessarily* false. Rather, they work with a definition that on the whole stipulates there is something *suspicious* about such theories.

Gordon Wood, for example, argues that while belief in some *contemporary* conspiracy theories resembles paranoia (along the lines of Hofstadter), historically belief in such theories turned out to be understandable. As the providential view of politics—which saw the gods as being behind human affairs—was superseded with a more human-centric view of politics, it made sense to see the misfortunes of human affairs through the lens of conspiracies. Wood argues this view was just as mistaken, because it assumed the intentions of political agents were effectatious in a way that we, knowing more about politics *now,* should reject.[[17]](#endnote-17) As such, one of the reasons why we might be tempted to think conspiracy theories are suspicious as a class of explanation is because conspiracies are unlikely, or that when they do occur they amount to little of note.

For example, Peter Lipton considers belief in conspiracy theories to be suspicious because conspiracy theorists overstate the probability of conspiracies as salient causes of events.[[18]](#endnote-18) Preston Bost and Stephen Prunier talk about conspiracy theories with respect to their “**often** [emphasis mine] inherent-implausibility,”[[19]](#endnote-19) while Daniel Jolley and Karen Douglas talk about conspiracy theories as “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of events as secret plots by powerful forces rather than as overt activities or accidents.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

Conspiracy theories under these views are suspicious because conspiracy theorists overplay the likelihood of conspiracies as salient causes of certain kinds of events, or because conspirators are typically convenient dupes rather than the real perpetrators.

The notion that conspiracies themselves are either unlikely, or unlikely to succeed, has been an influential position in the literature and dates back at least to the seminal work of Karl Popper. He argued that as most events in the world are not the result of successful conspiracies, belief in what he labeled the “conspiracy theory of society” was prima facie irrational.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Yet, as Charles Pigden argues, Popper’s argument rests upon a false dilemma; conspiracy theorists, it turns out, do not believe history to be *solely* the product of successful conspiracies. Rather, history is the result of some successful conspiracies, some unsuccessful conspiracies, and also the product of some non-conspiracies.[[22]](#endnote-22) Not just that, but, as David Coady argues, many of the reasons we tend to think of conspiracies as unlikely or not noteworthy do not withstand scrutiny.[[23]](#endnote-23) We *might* be tempted to think conspiracies rarely happen, tend to be insignificant, often fail, or that governments rarely conspire. Yet, a cursory glance at history (both contemporary and in antiquity) shows that conspiracies happen more often than many of us might think, and that they are often quite successful. Indeed, once we factor in past instances of conspiratorial activity—as I have argued elsewhere—the idea that we should not at least consider conspiracies as *potential* explanations for certain kinds of events means we are downplaying the role evidence plays in our reasoning.[[24]](#endnote-24) Indeed, to borrow a term from Lee Basham, the idea that conspiracies are—at least in the West—uncommon and seldom successful is more an expression of political piety than the result of evidence-based reasoning.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Crippled, Vice-Ridden Epistemologies

Some scholars find belief in conspiracy theories to be suspicious because conspiracy theorists suffer from some kind of pathology of reasoning. Take, for example, the work of Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule; they posit that conspiracy theorists suffer from a *crippled epistemology*, locating the problem of belief in conspiracy theories in the epistemic practices of conspiracy theorists.[[26]](#endnote-26) A similar argument is advanced by Quassim Cassam, who argues that conspiracy theorists suffer from the epistemic vice of gullibility.[[27]](#endnote-27)

David Grimes takes an interesting perspective on this issue. The problem with belief in conspiracy theories, he argues, is that conspiracy theorists radically overestimate the viability of conspiratorial activity. Grimes argues conspirators cannot help but leak evidence of their conspiracies the more time passes, which means not only that certain long-standing conspiracy theories are irrational to believe, but conspiracy theorists overstate the competence and ability of conspirators.[[28]](#endnote-28) However, the problem with these kinds of arguments face a number of problems. For one thing, the kind of examples we typically use to show that conspiracies are unsuccessful are unsuccessful conspiracies; we use examples of failed conspiracies to infer that conspiracies typically fail. Yet we have inadequate grounds to make that inductive leap, for a multitude of reasons. The first is that part and parcel of many a successful conspiracy will be keeping that conspiracy out of public knowledge. As such, we are faced with the problem of not knowing how many successful conspiracies have occurred.

The second problem is that as long-term secrecy is only a function of some conspiracies, the revelation of a conspiracy tells us little about its viability; some conspiracies must be kept secret for a long time in order to keep up appearances (the Moscow Show Trials) while some conspiracies can be revealed almost immediately (the assassination of Julius Caesar).[[29]](#endnote-29) The third issue is more prosaic: the kind of belief in conspiracy theories being referred to in these analyses are merely a *subset* of belief in conspiracy theories generally. The fact some conspiracy theorists may believe in ultimately unviable conspiracy theories tells us little about the viability or belief in the wide range of conspiracy theory beliefs. So for the Sunsteins, Vermueles, Cassams, and Grimes of the conspiracy theory world, the very basis of this argument is a pejorative understanding of what counts as a conspiracy theory. That is, they work with the subset of prima facie false theories to make claims about belief in those theories generally.[[30]](#endnote-30) Yet, as I have argued extensively elsewhere, we should not generalize from a subset of these things called *conspiracy theories* in order to tarnish belief in such theories overall.[[31]](#endnote-31)

The Social Consequences

Sometimes what is taken to be suspicious about conspiracy theories stems from the stipulation that because conspiracies are a sinister activity, belief in conspiracy theories *generally* has negative social consequences.

For example, Jan-Willem van Prooijen claims that there are “many detrimental implications of believing in conspiracy theories”[[32]](#endnote-32) as do Michael Barkun[[33]](#endnote-33) and Viren Swami.[[34]](#endnote-34) Robert Brotherton and Christopher French claim that belief in conspiracy theories can have “detrimental consequences, both for individuals and for the wider community.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Sander van der Linden states that “potential exposure to conspiracy theories can have negative and undesirable societal consequences.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Karen Douglas, with Robbie Sutton, has argued that conspiracy theorists have a tendency to see conspiracies because they are the kind of person likely to conspire themselves.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Looking specifically at anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, Karen Douglas and Daniel Jolley conclude their analysis by saying “Ongoing investigations are needed to further identify the social consequences of conspiracism, and to identify potential ways to combat the effects of an ever-growing culture of conspiracism.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Douglas and Robbie Sutton have also argued in a similar vein.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Now, some of these scholars do pay lip service to the idea that belief in conspiracy theories can have positive social consequences (such as exposing government corruption, increasing watchfulness, etc.), but the negatives are taken to outweigh the positives.[[40]](#endnote-40) The most charitable reading of such arguments stems from the claim that belief in conspiracy theories threatens something about the public order, and any belief that weakens social bonds and the like must be prima facie questionable.

Yet that argument can easily be subverted, or abused. Jack Bratich, for example, argues that much of the rhetoric against conspiracy theorizing comes out of a curious intolerance to views that challenge liberal democratic institutions.[[41]](#endnote-41) Belief in conspiracy theories—under this kind of view—certainly could increase the public’s distrust in influential institutions, but only as a consequence of our constantly being told that conspiracy theorizing is beyond the pale. That is, the prohibition of even talking about treating conspiracy theories seriously leads to the *othering* of political voices, the consequence of which has negative social consequences in a democratic society.

For example, Lee Basham has argued that there are certain facts that are too toxic to ever be widely admitted to, let alone disseminated by those in authority. That is, some truths are toxic, and so to prevent widespread alarm and resultant distrust in government and related institutions, these facts must be covered up.[[42]](#endnote-42) As such, the prohibition against conspiracy theorizing—particularly because of its supposed negative consequences—is itself reason to be worried about what we might not be being told.

We might also think that some malign activities end up being politely ignored or downplayed by the public themselves. That is, sometimes we are *polite* about certain known sinister activities or injustices. For example—as evidenced by police corruption scandals of the 1970s, for example—the populace can be aware of systemic corruption and the like, but decide to *politely* ignore them. As I argue in “Conspiracy Theories on the Basis of Evidence,” we do not necessarily need to think cover-ups take place from the top, flowing down to the populace.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Whatever interpretation we take, the idea that we can justify our suspicion of conspiracy theories on the basis that belief in them has negative social consequences rests upon an assumption about the nature of our society, which is the very thing many conspiracy theorists question. Sometimes secretive behavior on the part of law enforcement might be necessary to uncover serious plots against the polis, and governments might have to negotiate with foreign powers behind closed doors in order to get the best deal for their citizens. However, just because belief in conspiracy theories might undermine our trust in the status quo, this is no reason to treat them as a suspicious class of theory. Indeed, treating conspiracy theories as inherently suspicious runs the risk of quashing necessary questions such as when secrecy is justified, and when such secrecy is actually conspiratorial.

Unofficial Stories

Conspiracy theories need not be considered sinister to be thought of as suspicious. Sometimes it is argued what makes belief in a conspiracy theory suspicious comes out of them being rivals to some other theory that has official status.

Perhaps the best example of this view is to be found in the work of Kathyrn Olmsted. She points out that talk of conspiracy theories is “often the story of the struggle over the power to control the public’s perception of an event. …Conspiracy theorists challenge this *official story* [emphasis mine], proposing counternarratives to the government’s history of an event.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

Olmsted’s work goes to great lengths to show that such suspicions of conspiracy (to wit, conspiracy theories), given what we know of recent history and politicking, is not *epistemically* suspicious. However, other conspiracy theorists take a harder line. For example, Michael Barkun,[[45]](#endnote-45) Bessi et al.,[[46]](#endnote-46),and Neil Levy[[47]](#endnote-47) all posit that we have grounds for *preferring* official stories over rival conspiracy theories by virtue of official stories being official.

The chief problem here is in mistaking official status with epistemic authority (a point which I have critiqued elsewhere); the fact some theory has official status tells us nothing about its epistemic merits.[[48]](#endnote-48) Sometimes we mistake officialness in a political sense with officialness in an expertise sense, and sometimes we mistake the *appearance of authority* (whether it be a fee-to-publish journal article or an astroturf organization’s “documentary”) with expertise. It turns out we are easily confused or fooled by the appellation *official*. This conflation, then, between officialness and epistemic merit has allowed some unwarranted conspiracy theories to flourish *merely* because they have the appearance of being official.

David Coady—taking a different tack—argues that conspiracy theories are *in some sense* unofficial stories. However, this simply marks out conspiracy theories as unofficial in the same way that rumors are unofficial; they are claims which have not been given some official imprimatur. Given that official theories can be conspiratorial, their officialness does not tell us they are epistemically superior. Rather, it just tells us that we typically refrain from calling official theories “conspiracy theories.”[[49]](#endnote-49)

Yet respect for common usage is still a problem. For one thing, it is not clear that the labels *conspiracy theory* and *conspiracy theorist* necessarily have much pejorative baggage. Indeed, many recent political scandals have been labeled as *conspiracy theories* yet been believed anyway. Take the claims of the Coalition of the Willing. Back in 2003 members of the coalition tried to convince the public that the Iraqi regime was manufacturing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), and anyone who said that evidence was specious, fabricated, or disinformation were simply engaging in or promoting conspiracy theories. Then there is the case of then Prime Minister of New Zealand John Key’s unsuccessful claim in 2014 that allegations of dirty politicking by his office was just a conspiracy theory; in both cases the label failed to have much effect. As recent work by Mike Wood shows, while there are many assumptions about the label “conspiracy theory” there has been little work to test whether the label has the pejorative implication some academics attribute to it.[[50]](#endnote-50)

There are, I take it, two related problems here. The first is that so-called “official stories” (or “official theories”) can, as Coady points out, be just as conspiratorial as some rival conspiracy theory. It is hard to not be a conspiracy theorist about the events of 9/11, because even the official theory advances a conspiracy; the hijackers worked in secret to carry out their terrorist attack. The other problem is both temporal and spatial: what gets called a *conspiracy theory* at one time or in one place can labeled the *official story* at some other time or place. For example, Jolley, Douglas, and Sutton bake into their definition that conspiracy theories are largely rivals to some official explanation.[[51]](#endnote-51) Yet the examples they cite as *true* conspiracy theories—Watergate, Iran–Contra, and Tuskegee syphilis scandals—are no longer rivals to official explanations (even if they were at the time). Relatedly, a theory which is the official, received wisdom in one polity can be considered a conspiracy theory in another culture; in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan the official theory that al-Qaeda was behind the 9/11 attacks was roundly condemned as a false conspiracy theory back in 2001.

Given, then, that the pejorative is not fixed, scholars who want to focus on the pejorative aspect of conspiracy theory at time x or place y should be clear that *generally* what the term refers to is agnostic; rather, what counts here as pejorative is socially constituted. See the chapters by Andrew McKenzie-McHargh, and Martin Orr and Gina Husting in this volume for more on this matter.

Indeed, the idea that the label *conspiracy theory* is a matter of rhetoric has long standing in the literature. As Orr and Husting have previously argued, *conspiracy theorist* is part of the “machinery of interaction,” pointing out that “the label does conversational work no matter how true, false, or conspiracy-related your utterance is.”[[52]](#endnote-52)

Lance deHaven-Smith and Matthew Witt argue that treating the label as pejorative “risks weakening popular vigilance against abuses of power, election tampering, cover-ups, and other genuine threats to democratic governance.”[[53]](#endnote-53) Meanwhile, Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers point out that the pejorative use of “conspiracy theorist” by academics effectively means said theorists’ views are dismissed a priori, despite the boundary between conspiracy theories and non-conspiracy theories being contested ground.[[54]](#endnote-54) Michael Butter and Peter Knight argue that the idea that we can produce *value-neutral* research on these things called conspiracy theories is misguided if we are working with *value-laden* definitions.[[55]](#endnote-55)

The problem is this: Even if scholars claim that conspiracy theories can be warranted, by focusing their attention on the class of suspect theories, they often draw broad conclusions about the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories *generally.* Yet it is not clear this subset of suspect conspiracy theories is representative of the wider kind. Thus, such a focus has the effect of restricting our analysis. As such, should we not just work with a non-pejorative definition in the first place?

Conspiracy Theories as Theories about (Particular) Conspiracies

This, then, brings us to our third option. Once we rule out the utility of working with the first two kinds of definitions, then we are left with the option that all a conspiracy theory is, is *just* an explanation of an event which cites a conspiracy as a salient cause.

Indeed, if we are interested in the question of whether belief in conspiracy theories is rational or irrational, then this is the definition we *must* work with. After all, if we define belief in conspiracy theories as prima facie irrational or typically suspicious, then we end up assuming the very conclusion to our research questions. The use of pejorative definitions—wittingly or unwittingly—artificially reduces the possibility that it might be rational to believe some conspiracy theory.

A non-pejorative definition of what counts as a conspiracy theory is to be found in the philosophical literature, where scholars have sought to distinguish what exactly are the epistemic features which make belief in conspiracy theories plausible or implausible. This work has focused on the character of conspiracy theories, treating them as theories and thus appraising them with respect to the kinds of arguments and evidence conspiracy theorists advance for them.

For example, Brian Keeley has argued that, on investigation, some *kinds* of conspiracy theories do turn out to be suspicious. Keeley’s focus is on what he calls *mature* conspiracy theories, conspiracy theories which have persisted in our epistemic communities despite advancing no positive evidence. The lack of sufficient positive evidence over a significant period of time for the conspiracy is reason to be skeptical of these mature conspiracy theories. However, this skepticism for a particular class of conspiracy theory is not itself reason for a skepticism of the wider class of conspiracy theories generally. All it tells us is how epistemic agents should react to claims of mature conspiracy theories, not whether the conspiracy theories in question are false.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Lee Basham (as previously noted) attacks the strategy that says evidence of conspiracies would be readily available by pointing out that there are certain incentives by those—journalists, the police, and the like—who ostensibly investigate or guard against conspiracies to *not* speak up or about them.[[57]](#endnote-57)

David Coady has argued we have to radically rethink how we talk about conspiracy theorists, given both the rich history of conspiracies in our respective polities and the way in which some scholars are too reluctant to believe in conspiracies (and associated conspiracy theories).[[58]](#endnote-58) As noted elsewhere in this chapter, Coady also argues that while we might think there is a common use distinction between a theory being official or conspiratorial, this is a social convention which does no epistemic work.[[59]](#endnote-59)

Indeed, as I have argued in my book *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, the way in which we define what counts as either a conspiracy or a conspiracy theory effects our judgments about the prior probability or likeliness of conspiracies being in the pool of probable candidate explanations for particular kinds of events. Not just that, but once we are aware what work our definitions are doing, we come to realize that there is little hindrance to a conspiracy theory being the product of an inference to the best explanation.[[60]](#endnote-60) I have also argued that scholars often characterize conspiracy theorists and their beliefs by reference to a subset of conspiracy theorists whose beliefs are not representative of conspiracy theorists generally, let alone the wide variety of theories believed or propounded by conspiracy theorists.[[61]](#endnote-61)

Charles Pigden argues we should even expect segments of the population—investigative journalists, public prosecutors, and other officials who deal with the detection of corruption and malfeasance—to treat conspiracy theories seriously. If conspiracies are occurring, we ought to investigate them. However, if we operate with a definition which bakes in that such theories are prima facie false or typically suspicious, then this has the unfortunate social consequence of making it easier for conspirators to get away with their conspiracies.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Much of this philosophical work has focused on the question of whether our skepticism of these things called conspiracy theories holds any water. What is interesting about much of the scholarly work in our domain is the assumption that there *must* be something wrong with belief in conspiracy theories. Philosophers have interrogated the idea that we should hold conspiracy theories to a higher standard than other theories, and we have concluded that nothing about conspiracy theories per se justifies treating them differently.

This is not to say that we advocates of a general, non-pejorative definition think that belief in conspiracy theories is prima facie rational. Rather, we scholars of conspiracy theory must accept that we have to assess such beliefs on a case-by-case basis. That is, we ought to be particularists about conspiracy theories. The problem with generalist views that either bake in the idea that such theories are necessarily false, or that belief in such theories is typically problematic, is—as we have seen—that they get things back-to-front.

In the end, the worst that can be said about working with a non-pejorative definition of conspiracy theory is that it does not rule out the possibility that belief in conspiracy theories can be rational in a range of cases. That is, this definition entails the denial of a generalist thesis that there is something wrong with belief in conspiracy theories. If this is a problem for certain scholarly research programs, then this is not a problem with the definition. Rather, it is a problem that stems from working with definitions of conspiracy theory which bake in the irrationality or suspiciousness of such beliefs. The issue is not that conspiracy theories are epistemically suspect; the concern is we are working with suspect definitions of what counts as a conspiracy theory.

It is, after all, curious that as soon as we front *theory* with *conspiracy* some of us automatically treat such theories as prima facie suspicious. If certain scholars want to make a special case for conspiracy theories, then it is reasonable for the rest of us to ask whether we are playing fair with our terminology, or whether we have baked into our definitions the answers to our research programs.

Notes

1. I have, in earlier works, labeled such scholars as “conspiracy theory theorists,” in order to distinguish the analysis of these things called *conspiracy theories* from conspiracy theorizing (the generation and propagation of conspiracy theories). Conspiracy theory theorists work in what I call the field of *conspiracy theory theories*, an interdisciplinary domain of research of which this book is undoubtedly a product. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. We can also taxonomize conspiracy theories with respect to just how large or small we think conspiratorial groups need to be, whether conspiracy theories refer to inherently sinister activities, and the like. For details, see chapter 4 of Dentith, Matthew R. X. 2014. *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A term of art we owe to Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor’s. See Buenting, Joel and Jason Taylor. 2010. “Conspiracy Theories and Fortuitous Data.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 40(4): 567–578. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Another term of art we owe to Buenting and Taylor (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Matthew R. X. Dentith. 2017. “The Problem of Conspiracism” *Argumenta* 3(2): 327-343. DOI: 1023811/58.arg2017.den. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Swami, Viren, Martin Voracek, Stefan Stieger, Ulrich S. Tran, Adrian Furnham. 2014. “Analytic Thinking Reduces Belief in Conspiracy Theories” *Cognition*. 133(3): 572.

Interestingly, in a 2010 paper, Viren Swami and his co-authors endorsed, a definition much more in keeping with the second taxonomic type described in this chapter, which simply marks out such beliefs as somehow suspicious. See Swami, Viren, Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, and Adrian Furnham. 2010. “Unanswered Questions: A Preliminary Investigation of Personality and Individual Difference Predictors of 9/11 Conspiracist Beliefs.” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 24(6): 749–61. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Daniel Pipes. 1997. *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*. New York: Free Press: 2 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Hofstadter, Richard. 1965. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays.* 1st ed. New York: Knopf: 29 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Arnold, Gordon B. 2008. *Conspiracy Theory in Film, Television and Politics*. Westport, CT: Praegar. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Darwin, Hannah, Nick Neave, and Joni Holmes. 2011. “Belief in Conspiracy Theories. The Role of Paranormal Belief, Paranoid Ideation and Schizotypy.” *Personality and Individual Differences* 50(8): 1289–93. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. DiGrazia, Joseph. 2017. “The Social Determinants of Conspiratorial Ideation” *Socius* 3 (February): 1–9. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Barkun, Michael. 2003. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Zonis, Marvin and Craig M. Joseph. 1994. “Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East” *Political Psychology*. 15(3): 444. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Knight, Peter, ed. 2003. *Making Sense of Conspiracy Theories*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Dentith, “The Problem of Conspiracism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For further examples, see Olmsted, Kathryn S. 2009. *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Wood, Gordon S. 1982. “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39(3): 401–441.

Wood’s influence can be seen in Kaiser, eds. 2007. *Conspiracy in the French Revolution*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.; Roisman, Joseph. 2006. *The Rhetoric of Conspiracy in Ancient Athens*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.; Cubitt, Geoffrey. 1993. *The Jesuit Myth: Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth Century France*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.; and Pagán, Victoria Emma. 2012. *Conspiracy theory in Latin Literature*. Austin: University of Texas Press. Volker Heins argues (ala Gordon S. Wood) that while it is understandable to theorize about conspiracies, conspiracy theorists often go beyond the available evidence. See Heins, Volker. 2007. “Critical Theory and the Traps of Conspiracy Thinking.” *Philosophy Social Criticism* 33(7): 787–801. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
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Interestingly, Lance deHaven-Smith, argues that Popper (along with the political writings of Leo Strauss) is the primary reason as to why conspiracy theories are treated so dismissively in contemporary discourse. We might think of this as a conspiracy theory within the field of the study of conspiracy theories (or conspiracy theory theories). See deHaven-Smith, Lance. 2010. “Beyond Conspiracy Theory: Patterns of High Crime in American Government.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53(6): 795–825. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
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See also Dentith, “When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might be the Best Explanation.” [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
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Sunstein and Vermeule’s crippled epistemology is approvingly cited by Lewandowsky, Stephan, Klaus Oberauer, and Gilles E. Gignac. 2013. “NASA Faked the Moon Landing−−Therefore, (Climate) Science Is a Hoax : An Anatomy of the Motivated Rejection of Science.” *Psychological Science* 24(5): 622–33.;Swami, Voracek, Stieger, Tran, Furnham, “Analytic Thinking Reduces Belief in Conspiracy Theories.”; Harambam, Jaron and Stef Aupers. 2014. “Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science.” *Public Understanding of Science* 24(4): 466–480.; and Douglas, Karen M., Robbie M. Sutton, Mitchell J. Callan, Rael J. Dawtry, and Annelie J. Harvey. 2015. “Someone is Pulling the Strings: Hypersensitive Agency Detection and Belief in Conspiracy Theories.” *Thinking & Reasoning* 22(1): 57-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
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Charles Pigden has similarly critiqued Cassam’s arguments in Pidgen, Charles. 2016. “Are Conspiracy Theorists Epistemically Vicious?” In *A Companion to Applied Philosophy*, eds. Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, Kimberley Brownlee, and David Coady. London: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
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