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A Revised Defense of the *Le Monde* Group

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On January 7th, 2015 two French brothers shot, injured, and killed staff in the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical magazine, in Paris, France. Over the next several days, connected attacks followed. The brothers pledged their allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq. *Charlie Hebdo* regularly joked about the Islamic Prophet Muhammed and printed images of him that followers of Islam found offensive. This is widely regarded as motivating the attacks.

In the wake of all this, various stereotypical conspiracy theories emerged in France and the United States. These include:

The Jews are in control of the Islamic State or these particular brothers. The Jews are responsible for the shootings.

The French government orchestrated the shootings. It was an inside job.

France's Ministry of Education put out a series of video tools to help educators address the rise of these conspiracy theories. A group of social scientists that work on conspiracy theories produced a short document in response to the Ministry of Education's tools. They published this document in *Le Monde*.

### **Philosophers Criticize the *Le Monde* Group**

Some of the main figures in the philosophy of conspiracy theories reacted very negatively to this text in *Le Monde*. The Philosophers (Basham and Dentith 2016) say:

Governments and corporations routinely conspire to deceive people. This is no startling revelation to anyone who is historically or politically literate ... But if you believe a cadre of social psychologists, we're not supposed to talk about any of this.

Witness the recent declaration published in *Le Monde* by a group of social scientists who research conspiracy theorizing. In it they view a normal, even politically necessary, practice with horror. These researchers want to develop a science of how to stop the public from considering these things we call "conspiracy theories."

And they want the public to pay them for it (12).



Conspiracy theorizing is apparently a problem in need of a cure. Yes, conspiracy theorists are diseased, with a curious social ailment. In the academic literature this is known as the "pathologizing response" to conspiracy explanations, and is no longer well received. Why? Well, because we all believe in some theory about a conspiracy. And these researchers aim to cure us of that.

That's dangerous. Contrary to these social scientists, we believe that it is not conspiracy theorizing that is the danger, but rather the pathologizing response to conspiracy theories. The antidote to whatever problems conspiracy theories present is vigilance, not some faux intellectual sophistication which dismisses conspiracy theories out of hand. It's really quite simple when you think about it: conspiracy theorizing is essential to the functioning of any democracy, or indeed any ethically responsible society (13).

So the philosophers in question thought that the text in *Le Monde* was very dangerous and problematic.

### **What is Wrong With the Philosophers Criticism**

I think the Philosophers are deeply mistaken. It is clear that what the social scientists are worried about are the stereotypical conspiracy theories and not belief in any proposition ever with a conspiracy as part of its content. Those are the conspiracy theories they talk about in their research and use to conduct their experiments. Those are the conspiracy theories arising from the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting and its aftermath that the French government was concerned about. Here, again, are some of the stereotypes the social scientists and French Government are thinking about:

The Jews are in control of the Islamic State or these particular brothers. The Jews are responsible for the shootings.

The French government orchestrated the shootings. It was an inside job.

However we define 'conspiracy theory', whatever the correct definition turns out to be, the social scientists can be worried about those stereotypes, and they can make recommendations about how to address what they see as the growing influence of those stereotypes without in any way committing themselves to a total rejection of any belief in any proposition with a conspiracy as part of its content. They can say "There is something bad about \*this\* class of beliefs. You know, the ones where Jews are secretly behind the shooting. Or the ones where it is a false flag operation and it is really the French government that is responsible for the shootings." They can point to those beliefs, say they are bad, and speculate about how to address them, without at the same time denying that the French government sometimes conspires for evil or that the Nazis conspired, or, to take the favorite example of these philosophers, that the 9/11 hijackers were involved in a conspiracy.

Let me illustrate how this looks to me with a parody: Imagine it turns out that there is no simple and obvious definition of 'poison' that captures the stereotypical examples of poison but rules out regular liquids. So we've got all the stereotypes: various cleaning supplies, pesticides, various kinds of venom, and so on. Imagine that there is no interesting chemical structure that these stereotypes have in common. Nothing at the chemical level that they share and that would distinguish the stereotypes from any liquid. And now imagine, as a result, some philosophers decide that 'poison' should be defined in such a way as to include every liquid ever. And imagine that at some point there is a rise in the stereotypical poisons

in France. For some reason pesticides and venom and so on are more present in France than they used to be. The French government is worried about it. It produces videos trying to convince people to take caution about the poisons. Imagine biologists get together and publish a short article in *Le Monde*. The biologists work on poison. They perform experiments based on the stereotypical examples of poisons. And they suggest that the French government isn't going about educating people about poison correctly.

It would be misguided for the philosophers to complain about what the biologists are doing. It would be very strange if they were to say, "Oh really, you think we should stay away from poison. Well guess what, there is no simple definition of 'poison' that excludes water but includes the stereotypes of poison. So you just told the French government that they should convince people to stay away from water!!! Shame on you!" That would be deeply misguided. And I think something similar is going on when the philosophers criticize the *Le Monde* group. Nothing about pointing to stereotypical conspiracy theories and insisting that they are obviously false and should be dismissed requires denying that conspiracies sometimes occur.

The Philosophers have further criticisms of the social scientists. They (Basham and Dentith 2016) say:

The authors focus not so much on the conspiracy theories themselves, or just how they might imperil the public, or even what evidence there is for or against them. It's almost as if none of those questions really matter. What we are told by them is scientific techniques must be developed—and then deployed—so that people won't even recognize conspiracy as an option. Their goal? That conspiracies can never (or at least hardly ever) be allowed to explain certain events (or any events) in Western society ... [P]eople are to be scientifically directed, somehow, to fixate on the cry of "That's a conspiracy theory!," flee the room, and not reflect on any facts (12-13).

I think there is a more charitable way to interpret what the social scientists are doing here. We shouldn't attribute to them the idea that the French Government should brainwash its citizens to think that for any conspiracy we shouldn't believe in it.

Instead, it is clear that what the social scientists are up to is this: The particular stereotypes that they are discussing are obviously stupid. They are clearly false. The idea that the Jews were behind the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting is stupid. The idea that it was a false flag operation is stupid. But some French people think those views are right. It is a worthwhile goal to think about what we can do to make the stupidity of these particular examples pop out to French citizens. And that is what the French government was trying to do. But the social scientists were worried that the French government was screwing it up. And so they thought we should do research into the topic of how to get people to see the stupidity of these obviously stupid theories before we embark on an uninformed program in which we attempt to do so.

I mean, I get the idea of being a really, really hardcore anti-paternalist and thinking that the government shouldn't try to get us to believe anything at all. If that is your view, then fair

enough. I have no criticisms of your position to offer. If you think the government should just stay out of the belief forming business altogether, then OK. I get it. And I see why you have disagreement with what the French Government was doing and what the Le Monde group recommended. But here is what I don't get: I don't get the idea that we have some minimal openness to paternalism in belief forming on the government's part. But then insisting that recommending that the French Government studies how to get people to not believe stupid things like the stereotypical conspiracy theories that arose after the Charlie Hebdo shootings somehow entails giving up the ability to believe any conspiracy ever occurred at all.

## The Holocaust

The Philosophers (Basham and Dentith 2016) connect this issue to the Holocaust:

We have to honestly ask: How many people have been killed by well-evidenced conspiracy theories? And how many have been killed by a *flippant rejection* of conspiracy theory? ... Well, the Holocaust began as a conspiracy ... When Reich officials were challenged about their intentions and actions, they argued anything more sinister than relocation was an outrageous conspiracy theory. The same was said of Stalin's murderous Show Trials—an outrageous conspiracy theory, and the denials of a North Vietnamese attack on the US in the Gulf of Tonkin—yet another outrageous conspiracy theory which happens to be warranted on the then available evidence.... So we ask: How many more real outrages have slipped through the silence caused by conspiracy-denial (14)?

I think my earlier point applies here. The social scientists discussed specific stereotypes. Those are the ones that appear in their papers and that are the very specific conspiracy theories that they were worried about that arose in France after the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings. Those particular stereotypes are stupid. Those particular conspiracy theories that arose in reaction to the relevant shootings are stupid. You can think that those stereotypes should be dismissed without thinking that no one should ever look into any conspiracy ever. You can think that it is stupid to believe that the Jews were responsible for the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting without thinking it is stupid to believe that Hitler wasn't just relocating Jews to a better place. You can try to find ways to get people to see that the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings were not secretly ordered by conspiring Jews without at the same time getting people to dismiss the idea that Hitler wasn't just relocating Jews. There is no connection. Look at the examples the social scientists are concerned with. Judge them on the basis of those examples. Don't judge them on the basis of examples that are only connected because at an abstract level they share content.

Think of it this way: The *Le Monde* Group says that they are “concerned with the multiplication and dissemination of false information, errors in reason, even deliberate lies in a democracy that we would like to be more rigorous and rational” (17). Maybe what they are worried about isn't any belief in any conspiracy ever. Maybe what they are worried about are beliefs in conspiracy theories that are caused by or correlated with “dissemination of false information, errors in reason, even deliberate lies”(17). If we give the social scientists of the

*Le Monde* Group even that minimal amount of charity, the Philosophers' criticisms do not stick.

### **Return to The Iraq War**

The Philosophers also criticize the *Le Monde* group by appealing to the Iraq War. They (Basham and Dentith 2016) say:

[T]he catastrophe of the invasion of Iraq comes to mind. There is little doubt in the public or scholars that NATO, and many other governments, were intentionally misled and manipulated into this war, particularly by the U.S. government. This truth, well-evidenced at the time of grave decision, was silenced as an “outrageous conspiracy theory” by heads of state, mainstream media and yes, certain members of academia. Thus, a war that ultimately led to the death of hundreds of thousands, and a desperate global refugee crisis, was powerfully enabled by an anti-conspiracy theory panic (14).

Now, the Philosophers here don't say exactly what the conspiracy theories are that they are worried about. But Dentith, in a later paper replying to the *Le Monde* Group, makes clear that they think the idea that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was dismissed as a conspiracy theory. And that its dismissal was weaponized to support the war effort. As they (Dentith 2019) put it:

Those who are politically literate will be doubtlessly aware that part-and-parcel of the rationale for the invasion of Iraq in 2003<sup>ACE</sup> 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.

What you probably should not do is rewrite history to make the problem of the “US/UK Weapons of Mass Destructions” conspiracy theory disappear ... (2).

I am puzzled by this line. I understand that WMDs were the main rationale for war. I agree with that. But I don't agree that this lends any support to Dentith's criticism of the *Le Monde*

Group. The criticism doesn't just depend on the idea that WMDs were the rationale for war. It instead depends on the idea that conspiracy theory panic was employed to motivate the war. It is the idea that proponents of the war dismissed the idea that there were no WMDs as a mere conspiracy theory.

The problem is this: I don't see any sources to back up that claim. I can't find any evidence that anyone at the time suggested that the idea that there were no WMDs in Iraq was a conspiracy theory. So I don't think the social scientists belonging to the *Le Monde* group are rewriting history. I think they are just telling it as it is. The Philosophers don't give any evidence otherwise. In their original paper, they do quote Bush as saying this: "Let us never tolerate outrageous conspiracy theories" (Basham and Dentith 2016, 12).

And he does say that. But the Philosophers don't give us the full quote. In the full quote he doesn't say anything about WMDs being conspiracy theories. Instead he says this: "Let us never tolerate outrageous conspiracy theories concerning the attacks of September 11th; malicious lies that attempt to shift the blame away from the terrorists, themselves, away from the guilty."<sup>1</sup>

I think Bush is absolutely right here. Clearly it wasn't an inside job by the US Government. That is a ridiculous suggestion that deserves to be dismissed. Surely the Philosophers don't mean to dispute that. It was clearly the hijackers and clearly under the direction of Osama Bin Laden. If there is any conspiracy theory in the neighborhood that anyone in the Bush orbit ever endorsed it is the idea that Saddam Hussein had something to do with 9/11. And dismissing that as a wild conspiracy theory would only hurt Bush's war effort rather than help him.

Bush doesn't say anything here about denying the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as being a conspiracy theory. I can't find any reference to anyone of note making such a dismissal at the time (By all means, if somebody said it in making the case for war, let me know! I am happy to be corrected. But I think you are going to come up empty. I really just couldn't find anything like what the Philosophers were saying is there. And certainly nothing at all to suggest that conspiracy theory panic was required for Bush's war to proceed). And the Philosophers do not provide any such reference at all or any plausible leads. The only other place in which I was able to find Bush talking about conspiracy theories was in a speech indirectly criticizing Donald Trump. He says:

Our politics seems more vulnerable to conspiracy theories and outright fabrication. There are some signs that the intensity of support for democracy itself has waned, especially among the young, who never experienced the galvanizing moral clarity of the Cold War, or never focused on the ruin of entire nations by socialist central planning.<sup>2</sup>

That is it. All I could find are the two quotes. One is a criticism of 9/11 truther conspiracy theories. The other is a criticism of Donald Trump. Don't get me wrong. To put it in the mildest way possible, Bush seriously messed up when he chose to invade Iraq. And the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://time.com/4989764/george-w-bush-bigotry-seems-emboldened-speech-transcript/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://time.com/4989764/george-w-bush-bigotry-seems-emboldened-speech-transcript/>.

world is still paying the price for his horrible choice. But if the Philosophers really want to saddle Bush with dismissing doubt about weapons of mass destruction as mere conspiracy theories, then they should at least provide a single source in which he says it (or even just someone who is at least sort of in his orbit who said something at least a little bit like this that had at least some minimal impact or received at least some minimal attention). It looks to me like conspiracy theory panic didn't play any role at all in Bush's case for the war.

### **Contemporary Relevance**

There are four respects in which this dispute has enduring relevance.

First, there is the general issue of whether social scientists ought to study stereotypical conspiracy theories and whether they are permitted to think belief in the stereotypes is bad. This dispute continues in more recent literature. For example, Coady (2018; 2019; 2021; forthcoming) continues to publish criticisms of the social science of conspiracy theories. And many of the criticisms he raises are along the same lines as I have examined here. Indeed, a substantial portion of Coady's (2019) contribution to the *Routledge Handbook of Applied Epistemology* is devoted to criticizing the *Le Monde* Group. Among other things, Coady says:

There is a disturbing history of psychologists and psychiatrists pathologizing marginalized political views.... [W]e have got to the point that a group of prominent psychologists have written to a leading French newspaper, *Le Monde*, calling on the French government to more effectively “fight” the “disease” of conspiracy theories (166-167).

So this general line, and the critique of the *Le Monde* Group in particular, remains a prominent target for the Philosophers.

Second, the constant refrain that ‘if you think the stereotypes are bad, you are then committed to thinking that any belief that a conspiracy ever occurred is bad’ has been present in the philosophical literature for decades and continues to be pushed by philosophers. Pigden (1995) and (2007) and Coady (2007) started pushing this idea in the mid 90's. And to this day, together with Dentith (2019; 2021), Pigden (forthcoming) and Coady keep publishing basically the same idea over and over again. So this is not some random debate about the *Le Monde* Group that is peripheral to the philosophy of conspiracy theories. It is instead a direct practical application of the very heart of the main philosophical literature on conspiracy theories. And this work all uses the same examples that the Philosophers in their contributions to SERRC use. The star example is the Iraq War and the alleged conspiracy theory panic and weaponization of conspiracy theory talk that occurred.

Third, outside of the philosophical literature this idea has seeped into the mainstream. For example, in a widely shared article “Why I Am a Conspiracy Theorist,” Boersma (2021) argues that Christians should be conspiracy theorists. His evidence is that King David and the Early Church sometimes believed conspiracies occurred. And so they were conspiracy theorists. It is the same idea, that there is no way to maintain that the stereotypical



conspiracy theories are bad without also maintaining that any belief that a conspiracy happened at all is bad, that animates Boersma's article.

Fourth, France in the middle of the 2010's is not the only place that stereotypical conspiracy theories have gained prominence. A close family friend who I care about and respect has told me that, among other things, pandemics are really caused by magnetic shifts in the Earth, that more people have been killed by the COVID 19 vaccines than have been saved, and that by getting my child vaccinated I would be sacrificing my child to the demon Moloch. I have another friend who believes that after World War II, the Nazis developed technology beyond what the rest of the world has and went into isolation in the center of the Earth. I myself have doubts about exactly how the social scientists go about studying these things. I think the social scientists could do much better. But I am glad they are studying them. I want them to figure out what is going on. Something is wrong with some of the people that I care about. I think it is worth talking about. I am unimpressed that the main thrust of the decades long philosophical literature on this topic just amounts to "So you think the stereotypical examples of conspiracy theories are bad? Well guess what? That means you have to think that any belief that any conspiracy ever occurred is bad." We have, in natural language, a way to talk about the stereotypes. We use the term 'conspiracy theory'. By pushing their mistaken line again and again, the Philosophers rob us of the language to talk about what is happening to those we love.

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