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Particularism and the Conventional Wisdom

Scott Hill, Wichita State University, Scott.Hill@wichita.edu

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I am very grateful to Kurtis Hagen (2024) for pressing me on this topic. Working through his criticisms helped me to refine, modify, and improve my thoughts about where particularist allegations against the conventional wisdom go wrong.

Hagen says:

Scott Hill ... and Maarten Boudry and M. Giulia Napolitano ... suggest that one reason to abandon the generalism/particularism distinction is that almost no one *explicitly defends* generalism. However, they ignore the ubiquity of generalism as an unstated assumption, as well as arguments for weaker positions that nonetheless serve as intellectual cover for generalism. ... I argue that the common pejorative use of the phrase “conspiracy theory” is the fundamental basis for the distinction between generalism and particularism. That is, generalism describes the “conventional wisdom” about conspiracy theories to which particularism is the corrective. Further, though the “conventional wisdom” is false, this falsity is *not obvious* to many people. If it was obvious, it wouldn’t be the conventional wisdom (12).

I think Hagen might be right that there are at least a few philosophers who can plausibly be read as Generalists. But I deny that the conventional wisdom is Generalist. And I deny that there is a significant number of implicit or silent Generalists among scholars and the media as Hagen suggests. Rather, I think Particularists have mischaracterized the conventional wisdom. Particularists make it sound like the conventional wisdom prohibits belief in and investigation of conspiracy theories. But I deny that it does. If there is something wrong with the common pejorative use of ‘conspiracy theory’, it is not that it includes a commitment to Generalism.

Watergate

One important issue Hagen raises concerns Watergate: “It is a good thing Watergate was taken seriously and investigated, rather than being dismissed out of hand. Most people will acknowledge this. And yet Watergate was, during that investigation period, a conspiracy theory” (12).

Hagen points to Steve Clarke’s (2024) paper as providing evidence that Watergate was a conspiracy theory during the investigation. I read Clarke’s valuable paper. Clarke provides an example of one of Nixon’s surrogates dismissing it as “a third-rate burglary.” Clarke shows that a number of philosophers have given unsound arguments that it was not a conspiracy theory based on its content. So far so good. But Clarke also says this: “Before the folk regarded the Watergate theory as true, they regarded it as a mere conspiracy theory” (4).

I don’t think Clarke’s paper supports this claim. I see that the relevant allegations were merely speculative at first. I see that the journalists involved took risks. I see that people did not believe it right away. But none of this implies that anyone at the time thought of

Watergate as a conspiracy theory. Most importantly, there are no examples in Clarke's paper of anyone actually saying that Watergate was a conspiracy theory. As I understand it, the term 'conspiracy theory' was in common use before Watergate. I found articles in the *New York Times* written around the time of and before the Watergate investigation that called speculations about the JFK assassination 'conspiracy theories'.¹

I was unable to find anyone during that time, in the *Times* or in Clarke's paper or anywhere else, referring to Watergate as a 'conspiracy theory'. If no one at the time called Watergate a 'conspiracy theory', but people at the time were calling speculations about the JFK assassination 'conspiracy theories', that is at least some evidence that the folk did not regard Watergate as a mere conspiracy theory during the period of time in question. At any rate, I think the Particularist needs to do more to defend the claim that Watergate was a conspiracy theory at the time.²

I wish I knew more about the history surrounding Watergate. Given my ignorance about the topic, it is worth considering the very real possibility that people did dismiss Watergate as a

¹ Here are a few links I found (that require a subscription to view):

<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/11/25/archives/all-tips-run-down-by-warren-panel-doubts-may-remain-despite.html>. This article, from 1964, reads in part:

Perhaps the most fascinating attempt of the commission to get at the reasoning behind a conspiracy theory was its examination of Mark Lane, a New York lawyer who has lectured to paying audiences about his view that Oswald could not have been the assassin. Throughout his testimony, Mr. Lane declined to answer questions by the commission for various reasons, including what he termed the attorney client privilege. He was briefly Marguerite Oswald's lawyer.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1975/11/23/archives/the-assassination-assassination.html>. This article, from 1975, reads in part:

One charge that may fairly be laid against the critics is that in propagating their conspiracy theories they do not let their audiences in on anything that would tend to undermine or demolish this or that part of their grand mosaic. In a decade of largely unchallenged assault on the Warren Report, the critics have compiled a record of irresponsible polemics, misrepresentation of evidence, uncritical acceptance of unproven allegations, presentation of theory as though it were fact, and straining after solutions that violate evidence, logic and common sense.

I was unable to find any similar claims made about Watergate in the NYT or Clarke's paper or elsewhere. But please correct me if I am wrong. If there is evidence that I missed, I welcome correction and refutation!

² One additional clarification. Hagen says:

However, as Dentith and Tsapos (2024) take pains to point out in their reply to Boudry and Napolitano, it is not the case that particularists have argued only that particularism applies to conspiracy theories according to a minimal definition. Strangely, Hill takes their point to mean that some particularists accept that surprise parties count as conspiracy theories (as Dentith indeed does), while others do not. But this misses the point (15).

I think, and I took Boudry and Napolitano to think, that there are three uses of 'conspiracy theory' in play. There is the super broad use that counts surprise parties favored by Dentith and a few others. There is the still very broad but narrower use that counts Watergate but not surprise parties favored by Hagen and others. And then there is the narrower use that counts neither Watergate nor surprise parties but does count QAnon and MK Ultra. The first two are competing Particularist definitions. The third is the one that I take to be the conventional wisdom. If we use conspiracy theory in either of the two Particularist ways, then it is trivially true that Watergate is a conspiracy theory. If we talk in the way people normally talk, it is false that Watergate is a conspiracy theory.

mere conspiracy theory and I just missed it in my search. If so, I would welcome the correction. And, it is worth asking what would follow? My view is that it would not at all vindicate the Particularists complaints about the conventional wisdom. It is not as though Watergate was left uninvestigated. The truth was exposed. It took just a little over two years to go from the break-in to Nixon resigning. So it is hard for me to see how this example could plausibly support the Particularist claim that something is wrong with the conventional wisdom about conspiracy theories and that ‘conspiracy theory’ needs to be revised to be neutral to prevent it from being weaponized by the powerful. Instead, on the assumption that Watergate was dismissed as a mere conspiracy theory at the time, it seems like it is an example in which things worked pretty much as they should. The President did something wrong. Then he was caught and resigned. It seems to me that Watergate would, in that case, be a win for the conventional wisdom. Whatever pejorative attitudes the conventional wisdom might instruct people to have about conspiracy theories, those attitudes did not prevent Watergate from being investigated or the truth from coming out. And so the Particularist allegation that the conventional wisdom requires that conspiracy theories neither be believed nor investigated would in that case be false.

Pigden’s Challenge

Another important issue Hagen raises concerns Charles Pigden’s challenge:

In 2007, Charles Pigden described the “conventional wisdom” regarding conspiracy theories as the view that they “should be neither believed nor investigated” ... They are thought to be somehow “intellectually suspect” and often implied to be “utterly unbelievable, too silly to deserve the effort of a serious refutation” and “therefore not worth discussing” ... There is little doubt that many people treat theories characterized as “conspiracy theories” this way. To those who accept this view, Pigden laid down [a] challenge.... It has been seventeen years since Pigden articulated this challenge. And so far, no one has succeeded in meeting it.... Hill, Boudry, and Napolitano should recognize, given what they think of the Watergate example (quoted at the top of the next section), it is *not possible* to meet Pigden’s challenge (13).

I disagree and think it is possible to meet Pigden’s challenge. I think the challenge can be met by recognizing that Pigden mischaracterized the conventional wisdom. Pigden makes it sound like the conventional wisdom is that you are not allowed to investigate conspiracy theories and you shouldn’t believe in conspiracy theories. He makes it seem like just by calling something a ‘conspiracy theory’ politicians are able to get people to stop investigating. I find it difficult to believe that that is an accurate characterization of the conventional wisdom. As said above, I don’t think Watergate supports that claim. Nor am I convinced by the other examples Pigden uses to support this allegation. Pigden (2007; 2022, 126) offers this as an example:

Often the suggestion seems to be that conspiracy theories are not just suspect, but utterly unbelievable, too silly to deserve the effort of a serious

refutation. It is a common ploy on the part of politicians to dismiss critical allegations by describing them as conspiracy theories, a tactic of which Tony Blair was a master. The idea that the invasion of Iraq was ‘all about oil’ or that (as leaked memo seemed to show) President Bush had seriously proposed bombing al-Jazeera’s headquarters in Doha were both ‘conspiracy theories’ and therefore not worth discussing. Blair’s comments on the bombing memo were particularly eloquent. “Look, there’s a limit to what I can say - it’s all sub judice, ... But honestly, I mean, conspiracy theories...”. (The matter was ‘sub judice’ because the Attorney General, presumably at Blair’s behest, was prosecuting the people who had leaked the memo.)

Pigden’s source (which I encourage you to read for yourself)³ confirms a number of Pigden’s claims but adds other relevant information that I think undermines Pigden’s diagnosis of the example. It confirms the quote. It confirms that Blair’s government classified the document. It adds that people who have seen the document report that it shows Bush suggested bombing al-Jazeera. It adds that Blair looked tired when he made the comment. And it is notable that the author of the article is suspicious of Blair and suggests that there is a general climate of suspicion around Blair about this topic. The article says:

Looking tired, he appeared to lose his cool when asked about reports claiming that the memo showed him talking Mr. Bush out of mounting an air raid on al-Jazeera. “Look, there’s a limit to what I can say - it’s all sub judice,” he said. “But honestly, I mean, conspiracy theories...”

It is not plausible to suggest that Blair’s use of conspiracy theory talk was “masterful” or “eloquent” or that it did anything to prevent investigation into what Blair called a ‘conspiracy theory’. Instead, Blair is portrayed as desperate and pathetic in the article. Blair had real power. And, if Pigden is right, Blair exercised his power to keep the document from public scrutiny. But there is nothing about the example that suggests anyone was caused by Blair’s use of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ to stop investigating. Blair is instead presented as a pathetic figure grasping at something to say when he knows he is disbelieved.

Pigden’s example, therefore, is not a plausible instance of a claim that should have been investigated but instead was dismissed just because Blair called it a ‘conspiracy theory’. If Pigden is right, the problem isn’t that ‘conspiracy theory’ is, as Particularists claim, a powerful term that politicians can use to shut down debate. It is instead that powerful figures can classify what they want so that people who want to investigate are unable to do so.

Hagen says:

³<https://web.archive.org/web/20071017114640/http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=%2Fnews%2F2005%2F11%2F27%2Fjnz27.xml&sSheet=%2Fportal%2F2005%2F11%2F27%2Fixportal.html>.

How might Hill respond to Pigden’s challenge? Well, he offers no alternative definition that would enable us to identify which theories should be included and which should not. He does give a hint though. As a way of criticizing the “minimal” definition of conspiracy theories for being overly broad (about which I agree), Hill mentions “QAnon and MK Ultra” as representing what “normal people call ‘conspiracy theories.’”... Does he mean to suggest that *anything* that “normal” people call a “conspiracy theory” should count as one? It is not at all clear, but it seems more likely that he is suggesting that “QAnon and MK Ultra” are paradigmatic cases. However, it is a little odd that MKULTRA is suggested as a paradigmatic example, since the existence of Project MKULTRA is *a well-established fact*. Yes, there really was a secret CIA program that performed perverse experiments on unwitting American and Canadian citizens aiming to develop mind control techniques for producing unwitting assassins, among other outrageous things. So, if “normal” people call this a “conspiracy theory” and we want a definition that captures what such people mean by the term, then our definition would have to include ideas that are well-established facts. That would clearly fail Pigden’s second criterion: “neither investigating nor believing in [such] conspiracies makes epistemic sense” (14-15).

I used MK Ultra as an example of a conspiracy theory because I wanted to suggest an argument. But I was too opaque about what I was suggesting. So let me make the argument more explicit here. The argument is this: Pigden says that according to the conventional wisdom, “neither investigating nor believing in” conspiracy theories “makes epistemic sense.” But that is false. The conventional wisdom classifies MK Ultra as a conspiracy theory. The conventional wisdom encourages belief in and investigation of MK Ultra. So, Pigden is mistaken about the conventional wisdom.

Hagen says:

[T]he dismissive use of phrases like “That’s just a conspiracy theory” should be acknowledged to be mere slurs, with no implications for whether the theory should be believed or investigated. I would welcome a clear statement of agreement on this point by Hill (17).

I agree that merely calling something a ‘conspiracy theory’ and dismissing it in this way has no implications for whether it should be believed or investigated. I also think that is the conventional wisdom. Wood (2016) conducted a series of experiments testing whether calling something a ‘conspiracy theory’ reduces belief in it. Wood found that it doesn’t. I think Pigden’s Blair example also suggests that this is part of the conventional wisdom. Blair called the idea that Bush considered bombing al Jazeera a ‘conspiracy theory’. The author of the article Pigden cites and the figures the author talks about didn’t regard that as a reason to not believe or to stop investigating it.

Where the Generalists Are

I asked: “Where are the Generalists?” Hagen answered:

[T]he answer to the question “Where are the generalists?” is this: wherever one finds a theory dismissed because it is a conspiracy theory (as one often finds in the media), and wherever conspiracy theories are assumed to be false just because they fall into that category (as in much of the social science work on conspiracy theories). Indeed, anyone who dismisses an explanation with words like, “That’s just a conspiracy theory” is implicitly relying on generalism (18).

If that is where the Generalists are, I don’t think there are any Generalists (with the possible exception of some of the philosophers Hagen talks about. I thank Hagen for correcting me on that point). I recognize there are cases in which a claim that should be taken seriously is instead dismissed as a mere conspiracy theory. But I have yet to see evidence that such claims are dismissed *because* they are counted as conspiracy theories. Consider the lab leak hypothesis about the origins of COVID-19. It was prematurely dismissed. It was also called a ‘conspiracy theory’. But I don’t see why we should think that it was dismissed *because* it was called a ‘conspiracy theory’. Furthermore, I don’t see how changing the meaning of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ and making it neutral rather than pejorative, as Particularists suggest, would have helped. If ‘conspiracy theory’ were a neutral term and instead the lab leak hypothesis was called ‘preposterous’ by the media, I don’t think that would have changed the degree to which the lab leak hypothesis was unfairly dismissed.

Acknowledgment

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