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The Dominant Ordinary Use of ‘Conspiracy Theory’ is Narrow: A Reply to Censon

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<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-8Ji>.

I am grateful to Francesco Censon (2024) for his thoughtful and very interesting paper. I agree with almost everything he says. Here, however, I will focus on the one thing I disagree with in his valuable contribution. Censon says:

Hill’s semiotic position deprives social epistemology of the interdisciplinary contribution of its conceptual analysis. By neglecting such an analysis, it might be missed that the social scientists in *Le Monde’s* statement failed to realize the theoretical consequences in adopting, without declaring it, the narrow meaning of ‘stereotypical theories’ (the pejorative formulation), which I believe is not so much of ‘ordinary people’ but of the mass media. In this, *Le Monde’s* statement shows a theoretical superficiality that was rightly to be stigmatized, as did the philosophers, since in reality it was no longer clear what the social scientists were referring to (Censon 2024, 20).

Censon, as I understand him, agrees with Basham and Dentith (2016) and Duetz and Dentith (2022) that people ordinarily use ‘conspiracy theory’ in a broad way rather than in the narrow way that I think they use the term. And he agrees with the worry, expressed by Duetz and Dentith (2022, 44–45), that it is for this reason misleading for social scientists to report their results as being about conspiracy theories since they were using the narrow way of talking and ordinary people use the broad way of talking. As they put it:

What is problematic, from a theoretical perspective, is that the conspiracy theories appealed to in such polls are almost invariably ‘unwarranted’ or ‘obviously false’ conspiracy theories—i.e., those bad, mad, and wacky speculations lacking appropriate evidential support (Hill’s stereotypical conspiracy theories)—whilst the conclusions being drawn are presented in terms of conspiracy theories *generally* ... These over-generalized conclusions are not just academically problematic because they are inflated and unjustified, they are also socially/politically problematic because of the stigmatizing effects such conclusions entail for all conspiracy explanations (warranted ones included) (Duetz and Dentith 2022, 44–45).

While I agree with almost everything else Censon says, I strongly disagree with him about this one issue. Napolitano and Reuter (2021; 2023) and Reuter and Baumgartner (2024) and (forthcoming) conducted studies investigating how people ordinarily use ‘conspiracy theory’. The hypothesis that the dominant ordinary use is narrow is able to explain the results of these studies. The hypothesis that the dominant ordinary use is broad has difficulty explaining the relevant results. This is significant evidence that the dominant ordinary use of ‘conspiracy theory’ is narrow rather than broad. On the other hand, the hypothesis that the dominant ordinary use is broad has nothing comparable to recommend it. I encourage the interested reader to examine these studies in detail. See especially studies 2a and 2b of Napolitano and Reuter (2021, 2051). They summarize their results in the following way:

In Study 2a, we tested a specific account of the descriptive meaning of ‘conspiracy theory’. According to many theorists, conspiracy theories satisfy

the conspiracy criterion, i.e., the explanation at stake features a conspiracy. The majority of the participants considered it appropriate to apply the term ‘conspiracy theory’ to an explanation that features no conspiracy. The outcome of Study 2b revealed that the reverse claim also holds: Even if an explanation clearly includes a conspiracy, it is not considered to be a conspiracy theory, if the claim is true (Napolitano and Reuter 2021, 2051).

Now it may be, as Shields (2023; 2024) suggests, that the narrow use *shouldn't* be the dominant ordinary use.<sup>1</sup> And I think Shields is right that in their deepest and most insightful moments, this is what Basham, Dentith, and Duetz want the *Le Monde* Group, and all of us, to consider. That is a debate worth having. It is indeed something we should consider. But while there is an interesting debate to have about what the ordinary use of ‘conspiracy theory’ *should be*, it seems clear to me that the *actual* dominant use of ‘conspiracy theory’ is the narrow use. Or, at the very least, until proponents of the broad interpretation of ordinary usage have a criticism of the studies discussed above, or have plausible interpretations of those studies consistent with the broad use view, or have studies of their own pointing in a different direction, the narrow interpretation of dominant ordinary usage appears to be the correct interpretation. And for this reason, I remain very skeptical of the claim that by reporting their results as being about conspiracy theories, the *Le Monde* Group misled people because they meant something different than what most people mean by ‘conspiracy theory’.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the lab leak hypothesis was once dismissed as a mere conspiracy theory about the origins of COVID 19. But now it is considered a serious hypothesis. It is worth considering what lessons we can take from cases like this. One answer is that ‘conspiracy theory’, as it is ordinarily used, is a powerful term that shuts down debate. My take is different. I think ideas that are called ‘conspiracy theories’ are sometimes prematurely dismissed. But I doubt that such ideas are prematurely dismissed *because* they are called ‘conspiracy theories’. And I doubt that there are any serious harms caused by the ordinary use of ‘conspiracy theory’. The lesson of such cases isn’t a lesson about how we should use conspiracy theory talk but something else. I agree with Wood (2016) and I disagree with Husting and Orr (2007) and Dentith, Husting, and Orr (2024).

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