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Where Are the Generalists?

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In an insightful paper, "Why We Should Stop Talking about Generalism and Particularism: Moving the Debate on Conspiracy Theories Forward" (2023), Maarten Boudry and M. Giulia Napolitano argue that the distinction between Particularism and Generalism is not a fruitful one and that it leads to more confusion than clarity in debates about conspiracy theories. They point out that although it is easy to find people who say they are Particularists, it is harder to find people who say they are Generalists.

They point out that the people who are identified as Generalists by Particularists do not disagree with Particularists about almost any of the substantive issues that Particularists claim that they disagree about. And the one point of actual disagreement in this debate is muddied rather than clarified by the Particularist/Generalist distinction. A core argument is this:

> But if all it takes to reject generalism is to admit of the rationality of belief in the Watergate scandal, then … in our view not a single philosopher (or social scientist for that matter) has truly embraced generalism. That's because, by the lights of the standard (minimal) definition of CT that particularists favour, "generalism" is just obviously false and particularism trivially true (22).

Boudry and Napolitano further argue:

> [T]he "generalist" with her narrow definition and the "particularist" with her minimal definition may well agree on many substantive issues. … Both of them may for instance agree that beliefs about conspiracies are not necessarily, or even typically, irrational; that such beliefs deserve to be investigated and assessed on their individual merits … they may even agree that irrational beliefs about conspiracies have no single common feature that explains their irrationality, that each one is defective in its own unique way. In other words, these two people may only disagree about semantics –about what the term "conspiracy theory" means—and yet the generalism vs. particularism distinction would place them on opposite sides (24).

M R.X Dentith and Melina Tsapos (2024) have responded to Boudry and Napolitano's criticism. The main point they make is that there is a dispute among Particularists about how closely a definition of 'conspiracy theory' should depart from common usage. They note that Dentith's (2014) definition departs from common usage in virtue of Dentith's theory entailing that surprise parties count as conspiracy theories. They note that some Particularists disagree with Dentith about this and think surprise parties should not count as conspiracy theories. Dentith and Tsapos conclude:

> This is all to say that *within* particularism there are arguments about the best way to define or refine a non-evaluative definition. This shows quite clearly that—since this is an ongoing debate—the definitions offered by particularists are not some mere semantical fiat. Thus ... they have not 'vindicated' generalism, nor have they shown that the particularist definition is itself trivial (original emphasis, 50).

This seems like a misunderstanding. The fact that Dentith and other Particularists disagree about whether belief in surprise parties should count as a conspiracy theory does not change the fact that every Particularist definition of 'conspiracy theory' trivially entails that Watergate is a conspiracy theory, that no one denies belief in Watergate is rational, that people called 'Generalists' by Particularists often agree that conspiracy theories should be individually examined and not written off as a whole, that sometimes conspiracy theories turn out to be true, and that it is important to look at the individual details of conspiracy theories when assessing them. Boudry and Napolitano specify what they mean by the minimal definition of 'conspiracy theory' adopted by Particularists. They say:

> If a "conspiracy theory" is simply a hypothesis revolving around a secret plot between at least two people, usually with nefarious intentions (though variations on this definition would work equally well), then anyone with a modicum of historical knowledge will acknowledge that *some* such CTs are true, rational, justified, and well-supported (original emphasis, 22–23).

So they include within the scope of their minimal definition both the Dentith style view that surprise parties are conspiracy theories and the views of other Particularists according to which surprise parties are not conspiracy theories because, for example, nefarious intentions are required to count as a conspiracy theory. And Boudry and Napolitano argue that it is this issue about which there is a largely verbal dispute since everyone agrees belief in Watergate is rational, everyone agrees that the belief that conspiracies occur is rational, etc.

The considerations Dentith and Tsapos raise do show that there is a substantive, non-trivial debate between Particularists about whether surprise parties should count as conspiracy theories. But this doesn't address the worry Boudry and Napolitano raise. Showing that there is a substantive dispute between variations of X does not show that there is a substantive dispute between X and Y.

Here is another way to put the point: Imagine I tell you there is an important distinction between people who believe in potatoes and people who believe in xaxlops. You reply that you don't think the distinction is a fruitful one. This is because although it is easy to find people who say they believe in potatoes, it is hard to find anyone who says they believe in xaxlops. You give a long list of substantive claims that alleged xaxlop believers agree with potato believers about. While I claim it will be a revelation to the people I call 'xaxlopers' that some potatoes are brown and that it is important to distinguish between different kinds of potatoes, you point out that many of the people I call 'xaxlopers' already agree with all of this. It would be misguided for me to then respond to your criticism by noting that some believers in potatoes think most potatoes are light brown while others think most potatoes are dark brown. The fact that there is a substantive distinction between people who believe in potatoes does not show that there is a substantive distinction between people who believe in potatoes and people who allegedly believe in xaxlops instead. In the same way, the fact that there are substantive distinctions among Particularists does not show that there is a substantive distinction between people who are Particularists and the people who are called 'Generalists' by Particularists.

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It is true that there are substantive questions that Particularists sometimes argue about. One is "Does Watergate count as a conspiracy theory given ordinary usage?" While this is substantive, nothing about the definition of 'Particularism' would rule out answering one way or the other to this question. A second substantive question is "Are there theoretical benefits to adopting a broad conception of conspiracy theories that includes surprise parties?" As Dentith and Tsapos point out, some Particularists such as Dentith answer "Yes" to this question while others answer "No." These are all genuine disputes. But as substantive as these issues are, I don't think we should call people who answer "No" to these questions Generalists. This is because some Particularists deny these claims and one is not ruled out as a Particularist in virtue of denying them. Answering "No" does not conflict with the definition of 'Particularism'. So again, it is not clear who the Generalists are.

There is one issue about which there really is a substantive debate between Particularists and the people that they call 'Generalists'. That is the issue of whether there is a theoretical benefit to counting Watergate as a conspiracy theory even though it departs from common usage. Dentith and Tsapos point out that that is a substantive debate in their reply. I agree. But notice that Boudry and Napolitano also say that this is a substantive debate in the paper to which Dentith and Tsapos are replying. As Boudry and Napolitano put it:

> This is not to say that the semantic wrangle about how to define "CT" is completely empty and uninteresting. An important discussion that has been animating the debate is about how conspiracy theory should be defined (see for instance Napolitano and Reuter 2023; Shields 2023). Traditionally, particularists defend their semantic choice by pointing to how pejorative definitions of "conspiracy theory" have been weaponized by those in power, while generalists want to rescue the ordinary meaning of the term (which is clearly pejorative, see Napolitano and Reuter 2023) as well as the research project of social scientists. These are crucial and substantive disagreements that should be situated within wider philosophical debates on the role of conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics. But particularism and generalism are confusing labels to capture this disagreement (24).

Boudry and Napolitano say in their paper that this is a substantive debate. They just don't think the Particularism/Generalism distinction is needed to articulate the debate and that the distinction only confuses things. And they direct the reader to Napolitano's work in which she and Reuter defend their position on that substantive debate.

Are There Theoretical Benefits to Counting Surprise Parties as Conspiracy Theories?

It is important to address the claim that there are theoretical benefits to expanding the definition of 'conspiracy theory' to include surprise parties. Dentith and Tsapos direct us to chapter 4 of Dentith (2014) as an exemplar of the statement of such theoretical benefits. Just before the passage quoted, Dentith says:

> The focus, then, on surprise parties as an example of a kind of conspiratorial activity sets the bar low precisely because it allows us to analyse all kinds of

> conspiratorial activity and theories thereof. Our analysis should be on the question: 'When, if ever, is it rational to believe a conspiracy theory?' Although the focus on institutional conspiracy theories is understandable – because we should be worried about claims of institutional conspiratorial activity – it risks skewing the debate towards claims we are intuitively suspicious of (institutional conspiracies) rather than asking whether our suspicions about conspiracy theories generally are justified (51).

It is difficult to see why this would be true. If we want to know whether and when belief in the things normal people call 'conspiracy theories' such as QAnon and MK Ultra can be rational, why would defining 'conspiracy theory' so broadly that it includes surprise parties help with that? It just seems totally unrelated to the question we are interested in. On the other hand, if we are not inquiring about what normal people refer to as 'conspiracy theories' and are instead just asking whether conspiracies ever occur, the answer is trivial and obvious. Of course they do. No one denies that. There is no need to expand the definition of 'conspiracy theory' so that it includes surprise parties to see that.

Suppose we are interested in knowing whether the cause of belief in conspiracy theories is a problem. Belief in surprise parties is often caused by first hand experience. Belief in the things people usually classify as conspiracy theories like QAnon and MK Ultra is not. Social scientists claim that belief in the things people normally classify as conspiracy theories is caused by, or at least correlated with, various factors. If they are right, then broadening the definition of 'conspiracy theory' so that it includes surprise parties and then asking whether anything in that broad definition has a common problematic cause will not help us theorize about whether conspiracy theories (in ordinary language) have common causes or are correlated with a common set of factors. Better to look at the concrete examples individually and see if a common cause emerges. To include surprise parties just obfuscates things. So I don't think there are any theoretical benefits to using 'conspiracy theory' in the broad way Dentith suggests.

An Example

I would like to end with a feature of Dentith and Tsapos' paper that I think illustrates Boudry and Napolitano's point. Dentith and Tsapos say:

> In the previous section we noted that Boudry and Napolitano say that generalists (and thus colloquialists) may agree:
>
> > [T]hat beliefs about conspiracies are not necessarily, or even typically, irrational; that such beliefs deserve to be investigated and assessed on their individual merits (depending on time and resource constraints of course); they may even agree that irrational beliefs about conspiracies have no single common feature that explains their irrationality, that each one is defective in its own unique way (2023, 24).

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> Now, if Boudry and Napolitano believe this, this is not reflected in their own published research; Napolitano takes it that conspiracy theories are self-sealing beliefs that are irrational to believe (2021), and Boudry takes it that a chief problem of conspiracy theories is that they are epistemic black holes (2023). They seem to have snuck in provisos here about work that is not their own (appealing to 'other' generalists) but it is not clear who these other generalists are (for example, this does not seem to be the case for other generalists-in-spirit like Keith Harris [2022] or Quassim Cassam [2019]) (51).

I think this isn't quite right. There is no conflict between Boudry and Napolitano's other published research and what they say in the quoted passage. In the passage in question, Boudry and Napolitano discuss conspiracies. As they make clear, their usage of 'conspiracy theory' in most contexts is the normal one. It is such that mere beliefs about conspiracies are not the same things as conspiracy theories. Boudry and Napolitano in their earlier work argue that what they are calling 'conspiracy theories' have the defects in question. But they never say that mere beliefs in conspiracies have these defects. And their point in the passage is that, given the relevant definitions, there is nothing about being a Generalist that requires one to reject any of these stereotypically Particularist claims. So there is no conflict between their previously published work and what they say in the passage quoted by Dentith and Tsapos. Consider the full passage in question. Boudry and Napolitano say:

> [T]he "generalist" with her narrow definition and the "particularist" with her minimal definition may well agree on many substantive issues regarding the (ir)rationality of belief in conspiracies. Both of them may for instance agree that beliefs about conspiracies are not necessarily, or even typically, irrational; that such beliefs deserve to be investigated and assessed on their individual merits (depending on time and resource constraints of course); they may even agree that irrational beliefs about conspiracies have no single common feature that explains their irrationality, that each one is defective in its own unique way. In other words, these two people may only disagree about semantics –about what the term "conspiracy theory" means—and yet the generalism vs. particularism distinction would place them on opposite sides (24).

It is only if Boudry and Napolitano were using the very broad way of talking about 'conspiracy theories' that counts just about any belief in a conspiracy as a conspiracy theory that what they say in the quoted passage might plausibly imply that mere beliefs in conspiracies are irrational. But, as they take pains to make clear in the relevant passage and elsewhere, that just isn't the way they are talking. And that is not the way that others who are often called 'Generalists' talk.

Of course, Boudry and Napolitano have said something in their earlier work that conflicts with the idea that every single belief in a conspiracy that is irrational has a different explanation of its irrationality. If at least two beliefs in a conspiracy have a common irrational feature, then that conflicts with the relevant passage. But no one, not even

Particularists, would deny that. Surely there are at least two irrational beliefs about conspiracies in the history of the world that have a common cause! Dentith (2023) makes this very point. And so, even if what they say conflicts with that one point, that is not something that would plausibly separate the Boudry and Napolitano from and the Particularists.

So, we can think of their point as twofold: First, given the relevant definitions you can construct a hypothetical Generalist who is in spirit more Particularist than any actual Particularist. They are just placed in the Generalist camp because they use 'conspiracy theory' in the normal way rather than in the Particularist way. Second, regarding the views that actual people called 'Generalists' by Particularists adopt, hardly any of it conflicts with anything the Particularists claim. Every actual alleged Generalist agrees it is rational to believe in Watergate and surprise parties. Every actual alleged Generalist agrees that some beliefs in conspiracies have different causes than others and merit independent investigations without being written off in virtue of being beliefs about conspiracies. And every actual Particularist agrees with the alleged Generalists that there are at least subsets of conspiracy beliefs that have common problems.

This exchange serves to illustrate and support the point Boudry and Napolitano patiently make in their paper again and again. There is no disagreement here. If you talk in the way Particularist's talk, then it is trivial that conspiracy theories can be rationally believed and there should be no presumption against them. But not so if you talk in the way normal people talk and use 'conspiracy theory' in a narrower sense that does not include Watergate and surprise parties. No one denies that belief in Watergate and surprise parties is rational. Once we get clear on how everyone is talking it is obvious that Boudry and Napolitano are not guilty of the errors Dentith and Tsapos attribute to them.

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