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Hazards of Conceptual Engineering: Revisiting the Case of ‘Conspiracy Theory’

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For many philosophers, it doesn't seem right to say that we are mainly in the business of trying to describe our concepts. We are, at our best, trying to improve them. 'Conceptual engineering' describes this vision of philosophical practice. It is not hard to see its appeal. This metaphilosophical orientation gives us a clear mission that caters to what many take to be our distinct skill set: a combination of conceptual analysis and normative argument.

But when should we engage in conceptual engineering as philosophers exactly? Here is a straightforward answer: whenever a concept that plays some important role in our lives can be improved on—made more precise, clear, or useful for various practical and theoretical ends we might have. An immediate problem with this answer, however, is that not all concepts that play an important role in our lives are worth saving. Consider, for example, the concepts *savage*, *conversion therapy*, or *welfare queen*.¹ All have played profound roles in shaping the world in various ways. But it seems clear that they do not have a use that merits philosophers coming along to engineer them and making them into, somehow, "better" concepts. They are best consigned to the conceptual dustbin—mentioned and quoted as objects for sociological and historical study, but not engineered for future use.²

Abandoning and Engineering Concepts

There are other concepts, though, where the track record is more complex. Take, for example, the concept *terrorism*. Some researchers have argued that it is ripe for abandonment because states simply invoke the concept to demonize groups they do not like and to rationalize and cover up their own atrocities. Others argue that the concept can nonetheless be useful, despite this baggage. Eliminativists about racial concepts argue that these concepts lack any scientific utility and serve only to enforce politically and socially pernicious hierarchies; others argue that they still have important explanatory and political value. Some believe that the concept *fake news* should be abandoned because it lacks determinate content and invokes a reactionary political ideology, while others claim that it points to important novel aspects of our media landscape.³

A key part of what makes the first set of cases straightforward candidates for abandonment and the second set plausible candidates for abandonment for researchers is that speakers who generate or invoke these concepts often have no investment in genuine inquiry regarding the concept. They are instead seeking to impose this concept on others in order to serve various ends of theirs that they have no interest in subjecting to critical scrutiny. I have called this activity 'conceptual domination' (2021). When concepts are born of or are repeatedly sites of conceptual domination, then one strategy for combatting this state of affairs is opting for abandonment of the concept. Of course whether abandonment is ultimately called for will depend on the details of the case and the merit of any arguments in

¹ See Pigden (2023) on *bastard* for related discussion from the philosophy of conspiracy theory literature.

² My own view—for reasons I allude to at the end of my (2023)—is that there is a sense in which no concept can ever be permanently abandoned. I plan to defend this claim in future work and bracket it for the purposes of this discussion.

³ Coady's (2021) arguments for abandoning *fake news* parallel his arguments for abandoning *conspiracy theory*, in, for example, his (2018). See also Habgood-Coote (2019) on *fake news*.

favor of retaining or generating the concept. We will likely want to opt for abandonment in some cases and not others. In my (2023), I argue that a concept of conspiracy theory that builds in a negatively evaluative component (i.e. *conspiracy theory_e*) is a plausible candidate for abandonment by researchers. I addressed this case precisely because it falls into the second group and presents certain interesting challenges, including arguments in favor of engineering just such a concept, such as Napolitano and Reuter's (2021).

I argue in my (2023), based on a reading of certain particularist views, that *conspiracy theory_e* serves in part to stigmatize views that challenge or depart from a dominant perspective, which it does regardless of whether the views are epistemically well-supported or egregiously flawed and whether the views even posit a conspiracy. In turn, this stigma worryingly raises the epistemic profile of the dominant perspective. I give two main arguments in support of the claim that *conspiracy theory_e* enacts this function. The first, more minor argument is that this concept is often used to ostracize legitimate dissident perspectives. The second, main argument—drawn from my (2022)—is that this concept is regularly used to single out for censure those who may well have egregiously flawed beliefs but who are outside of dominant institutions; those within dominant institutions with beliefs that are just as flawed and have the capacity to cause far greater harm are, at best, treated as peripheral instances of the concept and, at worst, exempted from this opprobrium altogether. If right, these arguments would show that *conspiracy theory_e* is plausibly a site of conceptual domination and therefore a candidate for abandonment by researchers.⁴

As part of my (2023), I explain that Napolitano and Reuter's arguments in favor of conceptually engineering *conspiracy theory_e* have misinterpreted their foils—the particularists who, on my reading, want to resist and abandon this type of concept. In their recent reply to me, Napolitano and Reuter concede that they have misread the particularists and say that they endorse my reading of the project. But they are not convinced by the case I go on to make for resisting their own engineering attempt in light of this re-reading. While I appreciate Napolitano and Reuter's willingness to acknowledge their missteps and revise their views accordingly, their reply goes on to misconstrue my arguments urging skepticism about engineering projects such as theirs. Their discussion reveals certain points where I could have been clearer, but they also seem to have either missed or misunderstood key features of the critique.

In this reply, I explain those omissions and misreadings and reiterate the arguments from my original articles. In the first section, I clarify the first of my two arguments that *conspiracy theory_e* is a credible site of conceptual domination and critique elements of Napolitano and Reuter's reply. In the second section, I clarify the second of the two arguments to show that there is further good reason to think *conspiracy theory_e* is a site of conceptual domination. Here I clarify the relationship between this larger context and academic research, and I point to important mischaracterizations of my account in Napolitano and Reuter's reply. In the third and final section, I respond to Napolitano and Reuter's remaining arguments and show that the grounds for skepticism about such engineering projects remain.

⁴ When I refer to 'abandonment' in my (2023) and here, the target is *researchers* abandoning the concept.

Laying the Foundation for the Conceptual Domination Reading

In my (2023), I show that Napolitano and Reuter’s (2021) is wrong that, for particularists, a key function of *conspiracy theory*_e is preventing investigation of conspiracies, as they claimed. Napolitano and Reuter now agree with my reading that, for many particularists, a key function of *conspiracy theory*_e is “to stigmatize and marginalize views that challenge dominant institutions, figures, and beliefs, regardless of whether such views posit a conspiracy” (467). I further explain that this stigma directed at dissenting views also ends up wrongly treating these dominant institutions, figures, and beliefs as having a superior default epistemic standing.⁵

An important first clarification is that my account does *not* say that the relevant function of *conspiracy theory*_e is simply stigmatizing a view or belief. Napolitano and Reuter misconstrue this aspect of my discussion. They rightly point out that such stigma is often warranted (77). Morally abhorrent and epistemically disastrous views obviously deserve stigma; there’s nothing wrong with this kind of practice. But that is why the claim I take from certain particularists is not this general one, but much more precise: *conspiracy theory*_e helps to stigmatize views that dissent from a relevant dominant perspective, while in turn wrongly inflating the epistemic credibility of that dominant perspective.

How do I make the case for this function of *conspiracy theory*_e in my (2023)? Napolitano and Reuter claim that I “heavily lean on the analysis conducted by Husting and Orr (2007) and Orr and Husting (2019)” to do so (75). This is incorrect. Nothing I say in my (2023) or here hinges on one’s views about Husting and Orr’s pieces. I cite them in my original discussion for three main reasons:

First, because they are a very clear example of how Napolitano and Reuter’s (2021) get the particularists wrong on the question of the relevant function of *conspiracy theory*_e;

Second, because Napolitano and Reuter *themselves* cite Husting and Orr. In fact, each example I give in my (2023) from particularists on the above function of *conspiracy theory*_e is intentionally drawn from papers Napolitano and Reuter themselves cite in their (2021) to show that my reading is not a tendentious one, but follows from the texts themselves;

Third, Husting and Orr are focused on how an institution (*The New York Times*) with a great deal of formal and informal institutional authority uses this term.

⁵ Two points: first, as I point out in my (2023), the language of ‘function’ is Napolitano and Reuter’s, and I have reservations about its use absent further clarification. As with any natural language expression, there will be a plurality of functions at play rather than “the” singular function of an expression. Second, it is worth emphasizing that one need not be a particularist and endorse these claims about the specific stigmatizing function of *conspiracy theory*_e. This is a strain in some particularism that I find worth exploring and that seems particularly relevant to the question of whether *conspiracy theory*_e can be usefully conceptually engineered, but it is not a necessary dimension of the view.

This is the kind of investigation that I believe should be carried out and will be, when carefully performed, most illuminating in making assessments about the function(s) of politically charged terminology and concepts. Particular examples Husting and Orr cite in their discussions are clear illustrations of their broader claims regarding the relevant function, such as the viciously Islamophobic projection of Muslims as uniquely conspiratorial in, for instance, Friedman (2002a), Goode (2002), or Schmidt (2011), framing analyzed elsewhere in-depth in Aistorpe (2016). But whether or not one is a fan of Husting and Orr's full discussions does not have any bearing on the arguments I give in support of my claims regarding conceptual domination.

As already mentioned above, I give two main arguments in my (2023) in support of the claim that *conspiracy theory_e* enacts this specific stigmatizing function. The first is that “[i]n many cases, the concept [of *conspiracy theory_e*] is deployed to stigmatize and silence genuine dissidents”, giving the example of critics of American foreign policy (469). My discussion here is admittedly brief. This is because this claim strikes me as obviously right, but also not a particularly exciting or novel intervention in the literature. It does, however, directly support the notion that *conspiracy theory_e* has the relevant function, which is why I include it. Perhaps I was too hasty here.

Napolitano and Reuter never discuss this first argument, and at points they seem to think that it cannot be right: “*Conspiracy theory_e* may have a discrediting function which is warranted by what a *conspiracy theory_e* is. Theories with the epistemic flaws that *conspiracy theory_e* refers to are worthy of not being discussed” (81). They do clarify that, on their view, “people in power can misapply the label ‘conspiracy theory’ and, due to the unjust ways in which power structures affect credibility attributions, they can get away with it and silence dissenting voices from disenfranchised groups” (81). I will address this second point shortly, but we should be very clear that the use of *conspiracy theory_e* is routinely used to marginalize legitimate dissident views that are, at minimum, worthy of discussion and serious consideration, that are in some cases true and whose marginalization often contributes to disastrous political and epistemic outcomes. Here are various examples:

- 1). I will start with the example from my (2023) of Noam Chomsky's work criticizing U.S. for-profit media and foreign policy, particularly his joint work with Edward Herman on their propaganda model in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), among many other publications. In their (1988, xii), Herman and Chomsky try to preempt the predictable accusation against research that highlights the dangerous impact of powerful interests and institutions that this work is an instance of *conspiracy theory_e*.

Despite this preemption and their explanation that their analysis is functional rather than concerned with agents' intentions, this accusation was and is regularly invoked to dismiss this joint work and Chomsky's criticisms of US imperialism generally. See Klaehn's (2002) for an overview of these charges and their role in contributing to the scholarly neglect of the propaganda model: “[T]he term itself, ‘conspiracy theory’, is *precisely that, a label*, one that has been used as a means of dismissing the [propaganda model] without

granting a minimal presentation of the model or a consideration of evidence” (148-9). See also Herman’s (1996) for discussion.

To give just a sense of the gamut of these accusations, see Brown and Ainsley’s *Understanding International Relations* where we are warned about the “the extraordinary popularity of Chomsky’s conspiracy theories” (2005, 68); *The New Republic*: “*Manufacturing Consent* really is a conspiracy theory” (Lemann 1989, 36); Daniel Pipes: “Noam Chomsky forwards a conspiracy theory that blames the U.S. government for virtually every ill around the world” (Pipes 1997, 160); or Andrew Marr, one of the BBC’s most prominent journalists, labeling Chomsky a “conspiracist” (Marr 2017).⁶

2). The reporting of one of the most impactful contemporary investigative journalists, Seymour Hersh, who broke stories on the My Lai massacre, Abu Gharib, domestic CIA surveillance programs, among many others, is regularly dismissed and ignored by invocations of *conspiracy theory*. For example, Hersh’s recent reporting that the U.S. carried out the destruction of the Nord Stream pipeline—an event with staggering geopolitical and criminal implications—was immediately dismissed as a product of *conspiracy theory*. When questioned about Hersh’s reporting, the Danish Prime Minister insisted that it is not the case that “authorities are accountable for conspiracy theories” (Harding 2023). The US Ambassador to the UN called the reporting a series of “disinformation and conspiracy theories” (Kelley 2023). See historian Greg Grandin’s “It’s a Conspiracy! How to Discredit Seymour Hersh” for more relevant context and discussion (2015).

3). Tony Blair regularly depicted critics of the US-UK invasion of Iraq as “conspiracy theorists” who were therefore not to be taken seriously (Paxman 2003; Tempest 2003; Morris 2010). This move was widespread: “One of the most widely held conspiracy theories in the history of the United States is the assertion that President Bush lied in order to launch the Iraq war” (Chisholm 2006).

4). In the US War on Terror, depictions of Muslims as uniquely prone to conspiracy theories were instrumental ideologically for justifying the atrocities carried out by the US abroad and for silencing criticism of American foreign policy. Tim Aistrophe’s (2016)—the type of scholarly investigation that I view as a helpful model for what an investigation of the concept *conspiracy theory*, should look like —details how politicians from both

⁶ Curiously, Quassim Cassam seems to be unaware of this context: “To see the difference between being a critic of western governments and being a Conspiracy Theorist, you only need to look at Noam Chomsky. It’s hard to imagine a more passionate or more ardent critic of successive American and other western governments. Yet Chomsky is no Conspiracy Theorist” (2019, 84). But proponents of Cassam-esque views of “Conspiracy Theory” have used precisely this concept to dismiss Chomsky’s views (i.e. to dismiss Cassam’s paragon of legitimate dissidence)—exactly the kind of move that should, I suggest, give us pause before jumping to advocate for further use and engineering of this very concept.

major American parties, US intelligence and security institutions, and mainstream journalism generated “the Arab-Muslim paranoia narrative [that] delegitimises criticism of American foreign policy by characterising it as anti-Americanism, tying in to conspiracy theory, and situating this as the symptom of a deeper social-psychological ailment. This amounts to a potent disqualifying move that paints a diverse range of views in the colours of irrationality” (99). At the same time, this framing served to bolster the image of the West as occupying the default “rational pluralistic centre” (46). To take just a few examples (of which there are *many* more), we have:

- The major national security document for US policy, the 2006 NSS, discussing the Arab world’s susceptibility to a “culture of conspiracy and misinformation” that is contrasted with Western “democracy [that] offers freedom of speech, independent media, and the marketplace of ideas, which can expose and discredit falsehoods, prejudice and dishonest propaganda” (Bush 2006, 11; Aistorpe 2016, 112).
- Bernard Lewis’s clash of civilizations narrative of the War on Terror—key to the Bush administration’s worldview—that argues that “neurotic fantasies and conspiracy theories” are endemic to the Arab world (Lewis 2002; Aistorpe 2016, 27).
- Across the political aisle, we have Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, at a time where the US supported widespread human rights violations in Pakistan, warning that “Pakistan should understand that anti-Americanism and conspiracy theories will not make problems disappear” (Clinton 2011).
- A host of editorials by Thomas Friedman in *The New York Times* invoking this picture. We are told, for example, that the Arab world’s conspiratorial outlook means that “bin Laden touches something deep in the Arab-Muslim soul, even among those who condemn his murders. They still root for him as the one man who was not intimidated by America’s overweening power” (Friedman 2002b; Aistorpe 2016, 85).
- Turning to just one prominent publication, “of the twenty-two *Foreign Affairs* articles dealing with the link between terrorism and anti-Americanism published in the year after 9/11, twelve made reference to the paranoia theme” (Aistorpe 2016, 74).

Little or no mention is made in these discussions of the entirely true, well-documented US sponsored atrocities in the region, the backing of authoritarian regimes, or the crushing of democratic and popular movements that were at odds with US imperial interests. Such events are in fact the primary source of skepticism regarding US interventions among these populations. But Aistorpe shows how this criticism is strategically lumped in with transparently outlandish and abhorrent claims, especially antisemitic claims, which are also somehow treated as uniquely a reflection of the Arab world: “[T]he category ‘conspiracy

theory’...sweep[s] together a whole raft of different and unexamined claims, and then connect them with tropes about the dysfunctional cultural characteristics of undifferentiated Arab-Muslims” (Aistorpe 2016, 60).

5). Beyond foreign policy, critics of capitalism are also regularly smeared with invocations of *conspiracy theory*. To take just a few recent examples, we can observe this label deployed against those who claim that austerity measures are attempts to dismantle key public institutions such as the NHS in Britain (Daisley 2019), those who claim that billionaire owned media may be influenced by this ownership structure (Sonmez 2019), workers who claim that the world’s most powerful corporations may be using illegal union busting tactics (Soper and Day 2021), those who claim that corporate decision-making may be a key driver of inflation (Rampell 2022), etc.

These sorts of examples lay the foundation for the claim that *conspiracy theory* is a site of conceptual domination. Figures with formal institutional authority (politicians, prominent journalists at the most influential media outlets, government bureaucracies, intelligence services, among others) regularly invoke and seek to impose this concept to protect political interests they have no interest in subjecting to scrutiny. Perhaps Napolitano and Reuter will argue these examples are “cherry-picked” (75). But it is unclear why. If their argument is that these examples are selectively arrived at because so many of the views picked out by *conspiracy theory* are not like these examples—that they are in fact epistemically and politically disastrous—then this is precisely why I give my second argument, which addresses just this issue.

Alternatively, Napolitano and Reuter might invoke their point that *conspiracy theory* can be “misapplied” to “silence dissenting voices from disenfranchised groups”, but that this only happens because of “unjust ways in which power structures affect credibility attributions”, not because of the concept itself. They do not give any extended analysis of this claim, but, regardless, it is not promising. First, it is not at all clear that there is any *mis*application of the term in these cases. If the particularist diagnosis of the stigmatizing function is right, then the term is working exactly as it should. Second, there is a systematic pattern in these uses—a pattern of stigmatizing those who challenge dominant institutions (regardless of whether those challenges are well-supported or flawed) and treating the institutions themselves as having a default epistemic superiority. Contrast this type of pattern with the abuse of other terms or concepts for political purposes, such as the concept *liar*, which Napolitano and Reuter discuss (77-78).

Their claim is that plenty of figures abuse the concept *liar* for political gain, but we wouldn’t, given this abuse, call for abandonment of this concept. This general point is right of course, but doesn’t tell us anything about cases such as *conspiracy theory*. In the case of the abuse of *liar*, there is no broader pattern in usage that is intimately tied to the relevant concept. Cynical politicians will abuse *any* concept, regardless of its content, to serve their purposes. They are, in other words, simply conceptual dominators writ large. But we wouldn’t abandon the concepts *equality*, *justice*, or *rights* simply because they can be abused by these figures, and

that is because this abuse tells us nothing about the concepts themselves. There is no larger pattern in this abuse beyond the idiosyncratic interests of certain politicians.

The arguments in my discussion, however, point to clear systematic patterns in the usage of *conspiracy theory*, among authoritative speakers. Such patterns are not just a reflection of whatever an actor's personal interests happen to be; there is consistent work this concept does in tainting speakers who dissent from dominant views and in turn elevating the status of those dominant views. So while it is certainly the case that an abuse of a concept is not always a good argument for abandonment, it is also the case that some concepts are abused because they are built for or emerge as especially apt for abuse, such as the opening examples in this paper. The key question when assessing a specific case is whether this abuse is importantly bound up with the concept or not. To make that determination, we have to look and see.

Third, it is unclear why problematic “credibility attributions” come apart from invocations of *conspiracy theory*. If particularists are right about the stigmatizing function of this concept, then it plays an important role in generating these misguided credibility deficits in the first place. Relatedly, there is no neat separation between “power structures” and the terminology used by those structures. It is of course the case in the status-quo that power is structured in fundamentally undemocratic and unjust ways. The best explanations of these injustices will not primarily involve questions of language, but the distribution of material goods and political power. But that does not mean linguistic activity cannot play a key and dangerous role in propping up and solidifying these arrangements.

Consider again the example *welfare queen*. The injustice of the US welfare system is best explained through the prism of economic inequality and racism in the US generally, not linguistic injustice. But it clearly wouldn't follow that the explanatory primacy of these larger “power imbalances” of economic inequality and racism mean the term ‘welfare queen’ is unproblematic—that “the injustice...exist[s] in the world, not in our concepts” (Napolitano and Reuter 2023, 77). Both can be true—that the relevant economic and political power imbalances are unjust and that the concept *welfare queen* is a racist construction that should be abandoned. Napolitano and Reuter need to show why we should opt for an exclusive ‘or’ here, where either injustice resides “in the world” or “in our concepts”, but somehow not both. Furthermore, this combination of material and linguistic injustice is a key aspect of my account of conceptual domination—an account that Napolitano and Reuter say they endorse. But my account does not say that when authoritative speakers impose concepts on others to serve their preestablished ends that this imposition exhaustively explains the relevant injustice; it says that power imbalances can also make their way into our conceptual lives in harmful ways, in addition to whatever other wrongs may occur from these imbalances.

Academic Research and Conceptual Domination

This first argument, regarding the marginalizing and silencing of legitimate dissident views, is not my main one, however. My second argument points to the more subtle and insidious ways *conspiracy theory* serves to stigmatize those on the margins and endow dominant institutions and those who inhabit them with a dangerously inflated epistemic credibility. This is the argument of my (2022), which I view as my main contribution to the philosophy

of conspiracy theories. Napolitano and Reuter mention this discussion, but seem to misunderstand the project. What is the main line of argument in my (2022)? I explain that among those who utilize the *conspiracy theory*, there is a clear pattern of centering what I call Non-Dominant Institution Conspiracy Theories and Theorists (Non-DITs)—such as 9/11-as-inside-job, JFK assassination, faked moon landing, or flat earther beliefs, i.e. what are taken to be epistemically disastrous or propagandistic views and agents from institutions or social arrangements that lack substantial power or influence within the society in question.

At the same time, Dominant Institution Conspiracy Theories and Theorists (DITs), such as the fabrication of links between Iraq and Al Qaeda or domestic and global McCarthyism, are treated as afterthoughts, if discussed at all. I show that this trend is particularly apparent in academic research, both within and outside philosophy. Despite certain token references to DITs in the academic literature, they play almost no role in researchers’ analysis. I then argue that not only is this sidelining of DITs unwarranted, but that they are the best examples of *conspiracy theory*, and this is so by these researchers’ own lights. Were this insight properly internalized, it would require abandoning and revising many of the main claims these researchers’ make about conspiracy theories—including who believes them, why they believe them, and how the harms they cause should be addressed.

From Napolitano and Reuter’s reply, one might get the impression that the centering of DITs requires a relatively minor adjustment in the literature—that researchers just need to be a bit more careful to “make sure that dominant institutions’ conspiracy theories are called ‘conspiracy theories’ and treated as central cases in academic analyses” (81). Among proponents of *conspiracy theory*, however, the centering of Non-DITs is pervasive. I give examples from psychological and philosophical research of this phenomenon in my (2022) that readers can refer to. To provide a sense here, consider just the following from recent philosophical work:

- “When using the term CT, academics commonly refer to a category of unofficial or unconfirmed theories that are rejected or ignored by reputable historians, journalists, and other authorities. For example, this includes the theories that the moon landing never happened but was faked in a Hollywood studio, that Lee Harvey Oswald was just a patsy of a larger conspiracy against JFK, that 9/11 was an inside job carried out by the Bush administration, or that the coronavirus Sars-Cov-2, which unleashed the 2020 pandemic, was deliberately designed as a bio-weapon in a lab” (Boudry 2023, 613).
- “Despite being stipulative, the term ‘contrarian conspiracy theory’ closely matches ordinary usage of ‘conspiracy theory.’ For example, theories that say Lee Harvey Oswald was part of a CIA conspiracy to assassinate John F. Kennedy, 9/11 was an inside job, or the Freemasons are secretly controlling most world events are contrarian conspiracy theories as well as conspiracy theories” (Ross 2023, 2-3).

- “I am thinking of theories such as the fake moon landing, flat earth, or the Illuminati controlling the world”, with the central case of 9/11 as an inside job (Napolitano 2021, 83).

Furthermore, Napolitano and Reuter’s concession regarding the need for changing paradigm cases does not reckon with the fact that many researchers simply deny that there can even be such things as DITs since, on these views, *conspiracy theory_e* is necessarily contrarian, i.e. opposed to official views. (I explain why I do not view this move as plausible in my (2022) since it would rule out the application of *conspiracy theory_e* to, for example, the Nazis, whose antisemitic conspiracy theories were of course “official”.)

But my account goes beyond pointing out that DITs are rarely discussed. I argue that DITs are in fact the best examples of *conspiracy theory_e* and should therefore be at the heart of any analysis: they are much more clearly forms of political propaganda, are more epistemically insulated, and are far more harmful. But as a result of this uncritical centering of Non-DITs, the analysis given by proponents of *conspiracy theory_e* ends up profoundly warped. The following four claims are regularly endorsed:

1. Conspiracy theories are fabricated by amateurs who irresponsibly reject official explanations and experts;
2. Conspiracy theories are a product of extremist political ideologies;
3. Conspiracy theorists are socioeconomically downwardly mobile and lacking in formal education;
4. To prevent the harms conspiracy theories cause, we should mobilize government resources to infiltrate these communities and improve access to certain types of educational practices.

Although not every proponent of *conspiracy theory_e* endorses (1)-(4), these claims are widely advanced. But if I am right that DITs are the correct paradigm cases of *conspiracy theory_e*, then they are all false or in need of radical revision. With DITs centered, conspiracy theories

should not be primarily thought of as created, promoted, and consumed by extremist, online amateurs who are marginalized in various ways. On the contrary, it turns out that [*conspiracy theory_e*] should be primarily thought of as created, promoted, and consumed by those who occupy positions in a society’s dominant political, media, and economic institutions, who correspondingly enjoy enormous wealth, prestige, and a reign at the top of the ‘social ladder’, who have been credentialed and lauded by that society’s most prestigious educational institutions, and who create and promote [*conspiracy theories_e*] to protect the status-quo and their interests (Shields 2022, 26).

Our methods for combatting instances of *conspiracy theory_e* would also look entirely different: the emphasis would be on a fundamental restructuring of our institutions to ensure genuine avenues for dissent. When Napolitano and Reuter claim that I am somehow forced to acknowledge that researchers treat DITs as instance of *conspiracy theory_e*, they therefore

misconstrue my argument. This is not a concession on my part; it is a key feature of the account. My point is that academic researchers *do* mention DITs in passing, but that they play virtually no role in their analysis, as we can see from (1)-(4).

Now what does all of this have to do with conceptual domination? Over and over again in academic research involving *conspiracy theory*, Non-DITs are centered, and it is because of this perpetual move that researchers risk feeding into, however unwittingly, the stigmatizing function identified above—namely, treating those outside of relevant dominant institutional contexts as subject to damning epistemic defects from which our dominant institutions are exempt, despite the fact that those dominant institutions are much more clearly implicated in these flaws. No intention is needed to contribute to conceptual domination on the part of researchers. All that is required is continuing this practice of centering Non-DITs and sidelining DITs in their analysis to further support this larger context of conceptual domination; whether the researchers are engaging in conceptual domination themselves is not the central issue.⁷

In their reply, Napolitano and Reuter argue that if all my charge amounts to is that researchers are operating with “a view of a concept which includes certain instances but fails to treat them as paradigmatic”, then it is very hard to see how this kind of mistake can rise to the level of conceptual domination (2023, 80). But, as we just saw, the problem is not simply a lack of references to DITs. The problem is that the sidelining of DITs warps this research at its core, generating claims about who believes conspiracy theories, diagnoses of why they believe them, and how conspiracy theories should be combatted that are, at best, highly misleading and, at worst, simply false. The resulting analysis contributes to the relevant stigmatizing function.

Napolitano and Reuter criticize my arguments in a further way. They argue that we can imagine problematic stereotypes being taken as paradigmatic for a concept, such as racist or sexist paradigms of *immigrant*, *boss*, or *criminal*, but that we would not conclude that researchers operating with such paradigms were engaging in conceptual domination, that their engineering attempts should be viewed with suspicion, or that we should opt for abandonment. First, I would deny their first claim. Researchers can certainly engage in

⁷ An interesting wrinkle worth exploring in future work is that among certain more authoritative speakers (such as politicians and influential media outlets), DITs *have* been discussed more, but they are, crucially, DITs that the accusing dominant institution does not identify with. Jesse Walker has recently made this point: “[T]here is an increased willingness to use the term to deride ideas that do, in fact, have a lot of cultural cachet, *provided that this cachet is limited to an outgroup*” (2023, 20). To give a highly simplified US example, we find liberal media outlets referring to the Republican DIT that Democrats rigged the 2020 Presidential election, and we find conservative media outlets referring to the Democrats’ DIT that Russia rigged the 2016 Presidential election. But neither group will refer to their own DITs (or refer to them as DITs)—i.e. the liberal outlet will not refer to its Russiagate falsehoods as DITs and the conservative outlet will not refer to its election rigging claims as DITs. The same fundamental stigmatizing function therefore still holds here, which I often indicate in my (2023) and here with the qualifier ‘relevant’—that is, proponents of *conspiracy theory* are still stigmatizing views that dissent from the *relevant* dominant perspective: *we* do not create or promote epistemically disastrous, political propagandistic views, *they* do—even if they are themselves another dominant institution or members of one. Views that dissent from the relevant dominant perspective are stigmatized and the perspective itself treated as a default model of epistemic rationality.

conceptual domination in these cases, either directly or indirectly. It would depend on the specific nature of the work. Second, a key difference between these cases and *conspiracy theory*_e is that there is much clearer utility in the case of these concepts despite the baggage they have: they correspond to key legal, political, and economic arrangements that are worth tracking. But, as I reiterate below, the utility for *conspiracy theory*_e remains unclear. Third, skepticism about engineering projects may indeed be warranted in such cases. Again, it depends on the real-world details. In the cases of *immigrant* or *criminal*, for example, there is a great deal of pernicious ideological baggage attached to these concepts in many contexts. Researchers who want to engineer these concepts need to be scrupulous to address this baggage and explain how their views manage to extricate itself from it. In my view, the same should be done with attempts to engineer *conspiracy theory*_e.

It is worth clearing up a related misunderstanding. Napolitano and Reuter cycle through my criteria for assessing whether a speaker is engaged in conceptual domination to assess whether Sunstein and Vermeule and Cassam count as such and conclude—against a view they attribute to me—that they do not. This is a strange discussion because I go out of my way in my (2023) to avoid making specific judgments about researchers. Here is what I say: “Such judgments are often difficult, as I emphasize in my original discussion [of conceptual domination] and here”, and “the question of whether or not individual researchers are best characterized as engaging in conceptual domination is less important here than the larger process and context of conceptual domination that I believe particularists have identified and to which a great deal of this academic research ends up either directly or indirectly contributing” (469). I never make the charge that Cassam is engaging in conceptual domination. And as for Sunstein and Vermeule, I arrive at a very tentative judgment that readers can observe on (477 fn 14), where I also say “[n]othing in my argument...hangs on how we judge this particular case”. I do give one specific example in the paper of a researcher engaging in straightforward conceptual domination regarding *conspiracy theory*_e, which Napolitano and Reuter ignore. This is Goertzel’s bizarre (2019), and readers can consult my discussion of this case on (477, fn 13).

Perhaps I should have been clearer on the precise dynamic I have in mind and how academic researchers can contribute to contexts of conceptual domination without engaging in it directly themselves. As I explain in my (2023), when it comes to charged political terminology, “we should begin with those speakers whose formal and informal institutional authority gives them a privileged role in shaping linguistic meaning for the rest of us” (471). We should take this approach because it reflects both a semantic externalism that is widely endorsed among philosophers of language and because even if one does not endorse this general externalism, it is compelling in the specific context of political terminology: speakers with this institutional authority have both broader causal and constitutive influence to determine the meaning of our concepts and terms and can do so in uniquely harmful ways, as Ball (2020) helpfully shows.

We should therefore start in such cases by closely examining usage among figures with maximal institutional authority. This is what my first argument does. Against this backdrop, we can then understand the role of academic research. Researchers do not have the same authority—either causal or constitutive—as political figures, governments, or mainstream journalists to impact the meaning of political concepts or terms. But they do have a certain privileged position and thus a corresponding responsibility to account for the larger,

entrenched context in which their terminology is used. This means that we cannot simply assume the role of Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty in these cases: engineering terms or concepts in entirely novel ways regardless of any reigning context. When we fail to take into account this larger scene, we can end up contributing to the process of conceptual domination, however well-intentioned we may be and whatever our intended project may be. In this case, when we uncritically follow the practice of applying unique epistemic stigma to views that dissent from dominant institutions and in turn elevate the epistemic standing of those institutions, it is plausible that we are contributing to this broader context.

Directions for Future Research

Napolitano and Reuter do push back against certain elements of my (2022), and I want to address these points. They argue at one point that ordinary speakers do not marginalize DITs in their usage of *conspiracy theory*, and therefore do not inherit any broader stigmatizing function. They make this case using an “admittedly cursory analysis” from NOW corpus data (79) that they take to show that ordinary speakers do discuss DITs. There are several problems here. First, the passage they critique on their (78) from my (2023) is not presented in its relevant context. Readers can consult the original, which involves pre-empting a hypothetical objection I consider, rather than an independent view to which I am committed.

More importantly, though, when we are addressing the specific question of how we should conceptually engineer politically charged terminology, I am simply not convinced that we should defer to the morass of ordinary usage. This is why I discuss the importance of the externalist direction of explanation in my (2023) and emphasize the role of institutionally authoritative speakers. While there is a great deal of sociological or ethnographic interest in studies of ordinary speakers, I view it as a serious mistake to undertake an engineering project of this kind by taking our lead from those with no privileged semantic authority—i.e. taking our lead from what may or may not be the usage of an assortment of message board posters rather than starting with how some of the most powerful figures and institutions on earth deploy the term.

A further problem is that Napolitano and Reuter’s new corpus data leaves much to be desired. Among their examples of DITs being used in ordinary contexts are “a media show”, “an organization”, “a celebrity chef”, “a network”. I am just not sure what to do with these references. They also do not at all reflect my usage of ‘Dominant Institutions’. I give specific examples and analysis of how I understand the latter in my (2022, 5-8). In fairness, Napolitano and Reuter view this analysis as preliminary and say that new research on the topic will be forthcoming.

Third, corpus data on its own is unlikely to offer much help in avoiding the problems I diagnose. While my main argument in my (2022) is that DITs are sidelined in academic research involving *conspiracy theory*, it is also the case that epistemically and politically disastrous views that should be paradigmatic of *conspiracy theory* are routinely not even categorized as instances of the concept. Consider, for example, the original claim produced by the Organization of American States (OAS) and parroted by many US politicians and

nearly all mainstream press outlets that Evo Morales and his party rigged the 2019 Bolivian election—a claim that did not stand up to scrutiny in real-time and was then definitively debunked (MacLeod 2019). This accusation nonetheless led to a far right coup and an authoritarian regime that carried out widespread human rights violations, including the massacre of civilians and the torture of political opponents. Here, we have an obvious DIT. But you will have a great deal of trouble finding this case being referred to as an instance of *conspiracy theory*. And it is hard to overstate how many cases take just this shape—cases where dominant institutions fabricate and promote epistemically disastrous conspiracy theories, where they do so with a clear political agenda, and where these views cause monstrous harm. But such views are not categorized as examples of *conspiracy theory*. Failure to do so, however, feeds into the relevant stigmatizing function, and research that uncritically mirrors this usage does the same. If Napolitano and Reuter want to help enact a shift in paradigm cases, then they cannot avoid the work of digging into qualitative, first-order judgments about what does and does not receive categorization as *conspiracy theory*, rather than consulting only corpus data.

A final point. As I explain in my (2023), “the prospective conceptual engineer...incur[s] at least two crucial debts: first, they must show that their own engineered concept manages to extricate itself from this context of conceptual domination and certainly does not further contribute to it; second, they must show that there are various weighty theoretical and/or practical advantages for their engineered concept, advantages that clearly outweigh the harms of continuing to invoke a concept with a history of serving as a site of conceptual domination” (474). But Napolitano and Reuter do not tell us exactly what theoretical or practical advantages the concept *conspiracy theory* brings in their (2021) or in their reply beyond very gestural claims that I question in my (2023).

For any purported advantage that is advanced, we can also add a third desideratum: there has to be something this concept provides us with that we could not have or do otherwise. If the motivating desire for adding or retaining this concept is simply that we need an epistemic vocabulary for critiquing flawed or egregiously flawed views (which obviously many of the views *conspiracy theory* is applied to are) in our research, then we already have plenty of linguistic and conceptual options: ‘absurd’, ‘preposterous’, ‘false’, ‘flawed’, ‘propaganda’, ‘lie’, ‘irrational’, ‘dogmatic’, ‘insensitive to evidence’, ‘bigoted’, ‘antisemitic’, ‘racist’, ‘xenophobic’, etc.⁸ Furthermore, within the particularist framework, all such adjectives can be appended to the very term ‘conspiracy theory’, where the latter does not correspond to a concept with a built-in negative evaluative component. For some unspecified reason, however, these terms and concepts are deemed inadequate. But why retain or generate a distinct concept loaded with worrying baggage to communicate thoughts and criticism we can easily convey using other concepts and terms that have none of this history?⁹ Researchers in other disciplines

⁸ This mirrors one of Habgood-Coote’s arguments in favor of abandoning *fake news* (2019, 1047-8).

⁹ An area where a pejorative concept of a specific type of conspiracy (and an attendant pejorative concept for attributing belief in this type of conspiracy theory) does have clear utility is in the analysis of a specific dimension of bigotry, especially as it manifests in the contexts of antisemitism, xenophobia, and various other types of racism. Such views often attribute a supernatural level of power and conspiratorial coordination that is taken to issue from an imaginary “essential” nature of the target social group. But *conspiracy theory* will not help here. First, Napolitano and Reuter themselves deny that *conspiracy theory* picks out claims about conspiracies; second, any purported advantage of *conspiracy theory* would obviously be non-unique since these are a specific subset of cases, which would allow particularist accounts access to any such analysis; third, invocations of

rightly point out that it can of course be “simultaneously true that a specific claim is wrong *and* that the way it is understood signifies a discourse worth critically investigating”, and if this critical investigation reveals sufficiently insidious and pernicious political baggage, then the relevant stigmatizing concept should plausibly be eschewed in our work and replaced with better theoretical tools (Aistorpe 2016, 61).

So where does all of this leave us? Combining my (2022) and (2023), my overarching position is as follows: either academic research invoking *conspiracy theory*_e needs to radically change to center the correct paradigm cases of DITs, which will require comprehensive revisions to the analyses of conspiracy theory and theorists within this literature, or, if the trend continues of researchers not making these changes, the concept should be abandoned. It should be abandoned by researchers because it contributes to the stigmatizing of dissent and the elevation of dominant institutions, figures, and beliefs as models of epistemic rationality. Perhaps these revisions will take place and a compelling case for engineering this concept will then emerge. I would welcome this turn. For now, the skepticism I argued for in my (2023) remains.

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*conspiracy theory*_e are regularly used to silence members of these very groups. For example, left-wing Jews are routinely smeared with accusations of *conspiracy theory*_e for criticizing Israeli policy (e.g. Goertzel’s (2019) accusations against Chomsky). Fourth, the question of what role the conspiracy element plays in this type of bigotry is complex. The imagined conspiracy seems to be downstream from the central source of hatred, which is the attributed dehumanizing or—more accurately—superhumanizing representations of the target social group. I plan to explore these dynamics further in future work, but they will require engaging carefully with the established traditions of scholarship examining these forms of hate. See my (2022, 21, fn 24) for references on contemporary scholarship on antisemitism.

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