



**SERRC**  
Social Epistemology  
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

Political Genealogies for Conspiracy Theories, Debunked

Alexios Stamatidis-Bréhier, Tel Aviv University / National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, [alexios.brehier@gmail.com](mailto:alexios.brehier@gmail.com)

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Stamatidis-Bréhier, Alexios. 2025 “Political Genealogies for Conspiracy Theories, Debunked.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 14 (1): 27–40.  
<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-9tl>.

## Abstract

In a recent paper, Nader Shoaibi (2024) makes a valuable contribution to the discussion on genealogies and conspiracy theories (CTs) by focusing on a particular kind of genealogy: what he calls 'political genealogies'. Roughly, political genealogies are not so much interested in the epistemic warrant (or rationality) of a given belief or theory. Rather, their function is to illuminate the social and political conditions that give rise to the spread of (unwarranted) CTs. Shoaibi also notes that such genealogies have an important normative dimension: by drawing on the social/political conditions surrounding CTs we are also invited to engage in a 'constructive strategy' concerning CT-believers. This strategy, according to Shoaibi, can be cashed out in terms of 'world-travelling' which, as per feminist philosopher Maria Lugones, involves radical humility and playfulness. I agree with a lot of what Shoaibi has to say in his paper. I find his notion of CT political genealogies philosophically fruitful since it carves out what I take to be novel conceptual space in the literature. And I welcome the appeal to 'world-travelling' when dealing with proponents of unwarranted CTs. In this piece I respond to some of Shoaibi's worries against epistemic genealogies, and I raise a concern about the possibility of political genealogies being hijacked by malicious actors. I also make some preliminary remarks about what could be called 'genealogical pluralism' about CTs, while also arguing for the primacy of epistemic genealogies.

## 1. Epistemic Genealogies

Conspiracy theories do not arise out of thin air. They are historically, socially, and politically situated artifacts. Certain causal sequences involving political actors and social conditions brought about the existence of such theories. In other words, conspiracy theories have *genealogies*. And, indeed, there has been a recent surge of papers in the literature that focus on the philosophical significance of these genealogies concerning the epistemic status of the conspiracy theories (CTs) they concern (see Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2024, 2023; Hauwald 2024; for related discussion on the origins of CTs see Brooks 2024; Keeley 2024; Harris 2024; for CT *narratives* see Stokes 2016; Dentith 2016).<sup>1</sup>

Drawing from other disciplines such as metaethics where similar arguments have been put forward, one can appeal to the genealogy of a belief to evaluate whether that belief is

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows I assume particularism about CTs (i.e. the view that there is nothing inherently epistemically problematic with CTs and that, broadly speaking, CTs should be investigated on case-by-case basis) (for some caveats concerning what I call 'local generalism' see Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2024, 2023) (on the 'consensus' view see Dentith 2023). It is also worth mentioning that the particularist project is particularly fitting for such genealogical investigations: particularism acknowledges and highlights the insight that CTs are complex social and historical phenomena that cannot be understood as falling under a single 'essence' or common set of generalizations.

epistemically warranted or not.<sup>2</sup> Simplifying, the causal sequence leading up to the adoption of the belief that p can either have a *debunking* or *vindictory* effect. If my visual belief that p was caused by hallucinatory drugs, then my belief is undermined.<sup>3</sup> If my belief that p was caused by the right sort of visual mechanism (coupled with the right conditions being in place) then my belief is vindicated.

Call this style of genealogies (encapsulating both debunking and vindictory effects), *epistemic genealogies*. It seems that such arguments can also be applied to CTs. The theory described in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is debunked given that the Protocols is a fabricated set of texts produced by antisemites. The Watergate conspiracy theory, on the other hand, is genealogically vindicated given that it is the result of proper journalistic methodology.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Political Genealogies

Nader Shoaibi (2024), in a recent and intriguing paper, makes a valuable contribution to the discussion on genealogies and CTs by focusing on a particular kind of genealogy: what he calls *political genealogies*.<sup>5</sup> Such genealogies are taken to have a ‘double function’. They reveal ‘something about the political structures we inhabit’, and ‘they also point the way forward by empowering us to recreate the world by forging new representational practices’ (9). Roughly, political genealogies are not so much interested in the epistemic warrant (or rationality) of a given belief or theory. Rather, their function is to ‘illuminate the social and political conditions that give rise to the spread of CTs’ (9).

Shoaibi also notes that such genealogies have an important *normative* dimension (this speaks to their second function): by drawing on the social/political conditions of CTs we are also invited to engage in a ‘constructive strategy’ concerning CT-believers which, according to Shoaibi, can be cashed out in terms of ‘world-travelling’ which, as per feminist philosopher Maria Lugones, involves radical humility and playfulness (section 6; Lugones 1987).

I agree with a lot of what Shoaibi has to say in his paper. I find his notion of CT political genealogies philosophically fruitful since it carves out what I take to be novel conceptual

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<sup>2</sup> I will focus on (conspiracy theory) beliefs for simplicity, but theories (and other kinds of entities such as attitudes) can also be genealogically evaluated. Still, there good reasons to think that a conspiracy theory T could have a different genealogy from a conspiracy *belief* involving T (see Duetz 2023; 2024 for discussion). For example, it could be that my belief that climate change CTs are true is due to various non-truth conducive psychological reasons (e.g., I had a related dream and I’m disposed to assign high credence to insights produced by my dreams), whereas climate change CTs *themselves* can be genealogically traced back to the machinations of the fossil fuel industry. There is much more to be said about genealogies in connection to theories and beliefs, but I will leave that discussion for future work. Many thanks to Julia Duetz for very helpful discussion here.

<sup>3</sup> One can distinguish between undercutting or rebutting defeaters about p (roughly, the latter debunk p itself, and the former debunk the reasons one could have for believing in p).

<sup>4</sup> Although it could be argued that the role of the news media in bringing down the Nixon government has been largely exaggerated and, perhaps, part of a ‘mythical narrative’ concerning the Watergate case (Campbell 2022).

<sup>5</sup> All in-text page and section number citations to Nader Shoaibi’s work refer to: Shoaibi, Nader. 2024. “Conspiracy Theorists’ World and Genealogy.” *Social Epistemology*, 1–16. doi: 10.1080/02691728.2024.2362679.

space in the literature. And I welcome the appeal to Lugones’s ‘world-travelling’ when dealing with proponents of unwarranted CTs. In this piece I respond to some of Shoaibi’s worries against epistemic genealogies, and I raise a concern about the potential of world-travelling being hijacked by malicious actors. I also make some preliminary remarks about what could be called *genealogical pluralism* about CTs, while also stressing the primacy of epistemic genealogies.

### 3. Epistemic vs Political Genealogies

Shoaibi motivates the philosophical usefulness of political genealogies partly by noting the limitations of epistemic genealogies. First, Shoaibi focuses on the following subclass of CTs: those theories about a conspiracy whose creators do not believe them to be true (2, 4). Elsewhere he uses stronger language claiming that these are conspiracy theories which are the result of a deceptive plot (or, in my preferred lingo, a ‘second-order conspiracy’: a conspiracy about a conspiracy theory) (Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2024). For example, consider the Protocols once again: there is clearly something epistemically wrong about this theory, and its genealogy can help reveal that. And yet, according to Shoaibi, there are epistemic genealogies of this sort which do *not* reveal what is problematic about the theories they concern.

How come? Shoaibi proceeds in two stages. First, he notes (following Srinivasan 2015), that epistemic genealogical analyses operate according to the principle of SAFETY:

**SAFETY** S’s belief that P is safe if and only if S could not have easily believed not-P using a sufficiently similar method she used to believe P.

Roughly, if a belief p is genealogically debunked then this entails that p is unsafe. Conversely, a belief p being genealogically vindicated entails that p is safe. So, if a fabricated CT like the Protocols is problematic, then this is captured by the fact that it is unsafe: different applications of more or less the same method would have easily revealed that the Protocols are false.

At this point, Shoaibi argues that there is a specific subclass of CTs which are epistemically unwarranted and yet come out as *safe* under SAFETY. Specifically, these are theories which, though fabricated, are believed by individuals through no fault of their own. Shoaibi doesn’t reject the idea that some CTs are, in fact, both unwarranted and unsafe. He simply wants to focus on theories whose unwarranted status seems to escape a proper diagnosis in terms of SAFETY. To illustrate:

[C]learly there are entirely reliable processes that one can come to trust a creator of CT. Think, for example, of someone who is born into a social and cultural context in which a CT creator, say, a neo-Nazi leader is celebrated as trustworthy. If situations like these are possible, then the above diagnosis of the problem of CTs in terms of lack of epistemic justification (by failing the safety condition) fails. That is because trusting those in one’s immediate

social and cultural context is, in general, a reliable way of forming beliefs, making such beliefs safe and therefore justified (5).

I'll return to political genealogies later. In this section I want to respond as a proponent of the 'purely epistemic' (6) genealogical method. Specifically, I am inclined to say that there are (at least) three options against Shoaibi's claim that safe, but unwarranted, CTs cannot be accommodated by epistemic genealogies.

### 3.1 Modalism vs Explanationism about Genealogical Defeat

First, one could grant the possibility of safe (and unwarranted) CTs but reject that SAFETY can accurately capture the epistemic function of epistemic genealogical debunking. In other words, one could reject so-called 'modalist' interpretations of genealogical debunking according to which a belief *p* is debunked insofar it fails to comply to some modal principle such as SAFETY (see Clarke-Doane and Baras 2019). Rather, recent advancements in metaethics and the epistemology of debunking arguments suggest an *explanationist* interpretation of genealogical defeat (see, e.g., Korman and Locke 2023; Bhogal 2023). Explanationism (for short) suggests that a belief *p* is debunked insofar as there is a lack of the right kind of *explanatory* connection between the belief that *p* and the relevant facts. Simply put, the belief that *p* is debunked if the facts do not *explain* that belief in the appropriate way. And, crucially, the facts can fail to explain the belief that *p* *even if* that belief is safe.

Let's tone down the abstractness and consider one Shoaibi's examples again. Someone who grew up in a neo-Nazi echo-chamber has formed (let us assume) safe beliefs. Under explanationism, these beliefs are still epistemically undermined given their genealogy: even if we assume that one wouldn't easily diverge from those beliefs using sufficiently similar methods, what's missing here is the right kind of explanatory connection between these beliefs and the facts.

Indeed, that these beliefs were developed in a neo-Nazi echo-chamber is what *causes*, and thus *explains*, the fact that these beliefs lack proper justification. By looking at the very nature of this echo-chamber one can determine that it involves mechanisms which are not truth-conducive nor do they conform to any plausible standard of epistemic justification.<sup>6</sup> To compare, again under explanationism, if the formation of a belief could be traced back to an independently plausible belief-formation mechanism (such as the ones employed in contemporary science) then that belief would be vindicated (since there *would be* the right kind of explanatory relation in place).

I should highlight that something like explanationism is assumed in my own treatment of genealogical defeat as applied to certain types of theories such as climate change and

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<sup>6</sup> In saying this I want to largely sidestep recent discussion about whether echo-chambers are *inherently* epistemically problematic in this sense (for discussion see Nguyen 2020; Ranalli and Malcolm 2023). For my purposes it suffices to note that *this particular* echo-chamber (as sketched by Shoaibi) involves epistemically problematic mechanisms.

antivaccine CTs. In fact, I happily grant that many of the believers of such CTs form (at least seemingly) safe beliefs. But there is a *reason* for this: there are extremely sophisticated mechanisms in place which, in a very deliberate and methodical way, attempt (often very successfully so) to manipulate conspiracy theory ‘consumers’ (Shoaibi 2024; Harambam 2020; Keeley 2024). Such methods include primarily social engineering tactics via the use of psychometric data, astroturfing, lobbying tactics through shady think tanks and PR firms, scientists operating within and/or outside academia, and *many* more (Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023, section 2; 2024, sections 4.1., 4.2.). This is partly why CT consumers of this sort are not to be *blamed* or *shamed*.<sup>7</sup> And I would even go as far as to suggest that they are victims of epistemic injustice. Nevertheless, as the explanationist model correctly predicts, their beliefs are genealogically debunked and thus lack proper epistemic justification.

### 3.2 Modal Security

I do not wish to pretend that adopting explanationism is an uncontroversial philosophical move. There is an ongoing and heated debate in the relevant literature. And although my sympathies lie with the explanationist model (primarily following Bhogal 2023), I cannot fully defend explanationism here. Still, it seems to me that *even under the modalist* model it isn’t clear that there can be plausible cases of safe, but unwarranted, CTs.

It all comes down to *which* modal principles one adopts and how these principles are spelled out. For simplicity I will focus on SAFETY, following Shoaibi, but I should point out that modalist accounts usually go for something like Justin Clarke-Doane and Dan Baras’ ‘modal security’ view according to which genealogical defeat requires adopting (some interpretation of) SAFETY *and* SENSITIVITY (Clarke-Doane and Baras 2019):

**SENSITIVITY** Our belief that P is sensitive iff had it been that not-P, we would not still have believed that P, had we used the method that we actually used to determine whether P.

Requiring that one’s beliefs (in order to be secure) need to be both safe *and* sensitive (in order to count as epistemically warranted) arguably yields a stricter account which straightforwardly rules out Shoaibi’s type of case. Even if one’s beliefs generated within the neo-Nazi echo-chambers are safe, they are still not *sensitive* to the facts. It is the case, I hope most of us can agree, that the neo-Nazi worldview is deeply empirically and normatively problematic. And yet those within the neo-Nazi echo-chamber are not sensitive to the actual empirical and normative facts (plausibly, due to the very nature of that echo-chamber). So it seems unlikely that there can be modally secure, and yet epistemically unwarranted, CTs.

### 3.3 Refined SAFETY

Relatedly, the same result seems to follow under more sophisticated versions of SAFETY. Shoaibi correctly notes that:

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<sup>7</sup> I wholeheartedly agree with Shoaibi (2024) and Brooks (2023) on this.

[T]he problem emerges if we choose a sufficiently general description of the method, for instance, adopting one's belief from a trusted source. If this is the method that the CT believer uses, then the diagnosis seems to fail because if forming one's beliefs based on the testimony of trusted sources is unreliable, then given how widely we rely on this process to form our beliefs, we seem committed to a global skeptical conclusion (5).

Effectively Shoaibi puts forward the following dilemma: either the method of forming one's beliefs based on the testimony of trusted sources is reliable, or it isn't. Adopting the first horn suggests that there can be safe, but unwarranted, CTs. Adopting the second horn entails global skepticism (since that method is so widely used).

I agree with Shoaibi that this is a tough dilemma. But I don't see why one should adopt such a coarse-grained characterization of the relevant method (i.e., 'adopting one's belief from a trusted source'). Surely more nuance can and should be introduced concerning what *counts* as a trusted source. The relevant literature on proper expertise, deference, and testimony is vast but some considerations seem uncontroversial, such as the track-record of an expert, and whether they are part of a credible scientific/academic community (for a classic account see Goldman 2001).

Naturally, spelling out exactly which features are constitutive of proper expertise is a non-trivial task. My point here is simply that there are some uncontroversial *markers* (at the very least) of trustworthy sources, and one can appeal to those markers to refine SAFETY.<sup>8</sup> For example, one could say that the belief that *p* is safe insofar as using a method appealing to experts with a good track-record and who belong to a credible scientific community, one wouldn't have easily arrived at not-*p* using that same method.

If SAFETY is refined in this way it is less clear to me that there are safe, but unwarranted, CTs. The beliefs formed within the neo-Nazi echo-chambers are not safe in this sense. Nor are the beliefs formed within antivax and climate change denialist communities safe, given that they would have been different had they been formed via proper scientific methodology. To be clear, those who adopt such unwarranted beliefs are not to be blamed since they *think* they're using an epistemically sound method. And there is a reason for this: the relevant malicious actors (i.e., 'second-order conspirators') generate this faulty impression via various methods. But this is still compatible with their beliefs being genealogically debunked.

There is a lot of room for the dialectic to continue at this point. Perhaps, as Shoaibi implies, the appeal to expert testimony (even in this refined sense) is unappealing given that we're working in the context of conspiracy theories (or, better, in a space of 'hostile epistemology') (Nguyen 2023). And, indeed, there are particular issues related to experts and conspiracy theories which I cannot tackle here (see, e.g., Dentith 2018 and Tsapos 2024). At any rate,

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<sup>8</sup> For other such heuristics see Stamatiadis-Bréhier (2023, 12-14)

my overall point is that there are at least three types of promising strategies one can use against Shoaibi's claim that there are safe, but unwarranted, CTs: (i) adopt explanationism instead of modalism about genealogical defeat, (ii) accept modalism but adopt the 'modal security' account which incorporates both principles of SAFETY and SENSITIVITY, (iii) or adopt a more fine-grained version of SAFETY.

#### 4. Genealogical Pluralism

Is this bad news for Shoaibi's political genealogies? I think not. It is true that Shoaibi motivates the fruitfulness of political genealogies by highlighting a putative limitation of epistemic genealogies. But even if one broadly accepts my defence of epistemic genealogies as per the previous section it seems that political genealogies have a valuable function and we should be happy to include them in our philosophical toolkit. And, crucially, performing that function does not hinge on epistemic genealogies being unable to offer a diagnosis of safe, but unwarranted, CTs.

As mentioned, Shoaibi's political genealogies have a dual function: (i) they reveal something about the political structures we inhabit, and (ii) they point the way forward by empowering us to recreate the world by forging new representational practices (9). It seems to me that (ii) is where the action is (I'll return to (i) in the next section). In other words, the novelty of political genealogies concerns their normative dimension, namely, their function as action-guiding considerations towards some emancipatory aim. As Shoaibi notes, following Amia Srinivasan's interpretation of Nietzsche's genealogical method (2019, 140):

[T]he theoretical function of genealogies isn't some technical epistemological point about the justification that we may or may not have for our judgements; rather, the true function of genealogies is to reveal something deep about the politics of power and to engage our creative capacity to construct the world anew (5).

Epistemic genealogies reveal whether a given belief is debunked or vindicated based on its genealogy. Political genealogies, it seems, also invite us to take action: after realizing that many of the features of the social world are of our own doing, we exercise our 'world-making' abilities to 'construct the world anew'.

In a sense, political genealogies in this sense are similar to other methods proposed in the literature such as Lorenzini's (2020) so-called 'possibilizing' genealogy.<sup>9</sup> This function of 'possibilizing' allows us to 'separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think' (Foucault 1984a, 46; in Lorenzini 2020, 2). The difference here with Shoaibi's genealogies seems to be in the *kind* of normative practice one proposes: possibilizing genealogies 'criticise and destabilise a given power/knowledge apparatus' via the use of so-called 'counter-conducts'

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<sup>9</sup> Lorenzini offers a reading of Foucault (a paradigmatic Nietzschean thinker) in terms of possibilizing genealogies.



(for discussion see Lorenzini 2016), whereas political genealogies invite us to adopt a playful attitude by adopting Lugone’s attitude of radical humility.

In fact, there seems to be a *plurality* of genealogies (and genealogical methods) which either have or *can* have interesting applications in the domain of conspiracy theories. For example:

*Epistemic* genealogies aim to either vindicate or debunk (i.e. ‘unmask’).<sup>10</sup>

*Political* genealogies aim to reconstruct via radical humility and playfulness (Shoaibi 2024).

*Problematising* genealogies aim to scrutinize a given phenomenon thus highlighting some of its potentially problematic aspects (while at the same time being ‘neutral’ in terms of the debunking/vindicating dichotomy).<sup>11</sup> (Koopman 2013).

*Possibilizing* genealogies aim to criticize and destabilize via counter-conducts which are purported to have inherent (or, even, ‘sui generis’) normative force (Lorenzini 2020).

*Deconstructive* genealogies aim to identify the normatively relevant structural features of a practice, such as that ‘it has internal fragmentation or tension’ (Prescott-Couch 2024).

*Rhetorical* genealogies aim to elicit a powerful emotional response from the relevant audience (Mourtou-Paradeisopoulou 2024).

Turning some of these (or other) methods into fully fleshed-out accounts concerning the status of CTs is a promising topic for future research (see section 6). My general claim is this: using one genealogical method to evaluate a CT shouldn’t exclude the use of different methods as well. We should adopt a pluralistic stance concerning the tools we use to understand CTs and naturally this involves recognizing that there can be many different kinds of genealogies.<sup>12</sup> I thus welcome Shoaibi’s method insofar as it can be used *alongside* purely epistemic genealogies.

## 5. Hijacked Political Genealogies

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<sup>10</sup> This seems to be by far the most traditional and widespread variety of genealogies. The relevant literatures are vast and they intertwine (and diverge) in interesting ways. Consider, for example, traditional readings of Nietzsche (e.g. Leiter 2002), discussions in contemporary metaethics concerning evolutionary debunking arguments (Street 2006; Bhogal 2023), as well as arguments in contemporary epistemology on the nature of debunking (see Korman 2019 for ‘debunking’ arguments as a class and, as noted, debates about modalism and explanationism). For applications of epistemic genealogies to CTs see Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023; 2024; Hauswald 2024.

<sup>11</sup> As Koopman notes (2013, 60; quoted in Harcourt 2024): ‘It is a form of genealogy that is neither for nor against the practices it inquires into [...] but is rather an attempt to clarify and intensify the difficulties that enable and disable those practices’.

<sup>12</sup> I am inspired here by Harcourt (2024) (who makes a similar claim about genealogical pluralism concerning critical praxis). A further motivating factor would be Dentith’s (2024) recent proposal for a pluralistic methodology in conspiracy theorizing.

There is, however, a sense in which epistemic genealogies take *priority* against political genealogies. Epistemic genealogies can operate without political or broadly normative considerations: they either epistemically vindicate or debunk their target. Political genealogies add, on top of that, some sort of normative ‘oomph’. For example, we can note that marginalized communities were consumers of COVID-19 CTs and, based on the (epistemic) genealogy of those theories, we can conclude that their beliefs are unwarranted. Still, using the political genealogical method one should also try to *engage* with these communities by considering the relevant socio-economic factors that fostered such beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

No doubt, this is a great suggestion. It seems to me, however, that the only way political genealogies can fulfil their normative function is by assuming the truth of an *epistemic* genealogy. To illustrate, it must first be established that COVID-19 CTs are bunk *before* we start engaging with the relevant communities (in whichever way). And this can only be done via epistemic genealogical methods. To compare, if COVID-19 CTs were genealogically *vindicated* (given that, say, they are the result of proper research rather than suspicious lobbying) then one’s world-travelling approach would have to be modified appropriately. So, to put it in slogan form: *political genealogies without epistemic genealogies are blind*.<sup>14</sup>

To put the same point more emphatically, I want to suggest that political genealogies can be easily hijacked if they lack a robust epistemic genealogical basis.<sup>15</sup> Consider Shoaibi’s helpful case of vaccine hesitancy in black and brown communities during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Take, for instance, the COVID vaccine hesitancy in the Black and brown communities during the first months after the vaccine was available. In light of the exploitative track record of the medical establishment in the US in the form of events such as the Tuskegee Experiment, it is no surprise that the Black and brown communities distrust the US government when it comes to medical treatment. That’s no surprise because the process by which they come to have that belief is reliable (8).

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<sup>13</sup> One might worry that genealogical pluralism conflicts with the idea that epistemic genealogies are ‘prior’ to political genealogies. There’s a lot of room for discussion here but here’s a potentially helpful analogy illustrating how my picture is coherent: non-reductive physicalist conceptions of lawhood are similarly pluralistic but also put forward a ‘priority’ thesis. Special-science laws (e.g. in economics) are not reduced to physical laws (this delivers ‘pluralism’ about laws). But clearly physical laws are *prior* to special-science laws in the sense that the latter presuppose that certain physical laws obtain (this delivers the idea that physical laws entertain a kind of ‘priority’). Many thanks to Nader Shoaibi for pushing me on this.

<sup>14</sup> One could retort that epistemic genealogies without a political dimension are ‘empty’ (as per the infamous idiom). Maybe (although the relevant sense of ‘empty’ would have to be specified to fully evaluate such a claim). At any rate, here I argue that epistemic genealogies are *necessary* for political genealogies to even get off the ground. And this seems to be the case for the other types of methods I listed in the previous section, although I don’t have to make this stronger claim. A possible exception (with some caveats worth exploring) is Mourtou-Paradeisopoulou’s (2024) view of genealogies as *rhetorical mechanisms* which arguably can operate even (or, rather, *especially*) via falsehoods.

<sup>15</sup> Epistemic genealogies can also be hijacked (for some preliminary remarks on ‘epistemic laundering’ see Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023, section 7).

Specifically, Shoaibi notes that political genealogies deliver three important insights: (i) they show that the CT beliefs arise out of a context in which their believers are likely to be oppressed, (ii) they reveal the manipulative nature of CT beliefs, and (iii) they reveal that the CT beliefs perpetuate and bolster a systematic oppressive environment (8, slightly paraphrased).

I agree with all three insights (bracketing potential nuances) and, in particular, (ii). This is because, as I've argued in my 2023, I believe there's strong evidence to suggest that COVID-19 vaccine conspiracy theories were largely repackaged, and long debunked, antivaccine propaganda that has been around for decades before the recent pandemic. So, contra Shoaibi, I would argue that epistemic genealogies *are* in the business of revealing these sorts of details. They don't simply focus 'myopically on the rational standing of an individual's beliefs' (Shoaibi 2024: 9). They, crucially, focus on the conditions in which a given belief or theory arises.

Note, however, that one can disagree with (ii) as stated. For instance, one could agree that certain brown and black communities had the inclination to be vaccine hesitant due to 'the exploitative track record of the medical establishment in the US in the form of events such as the Tuskegee Experiment' (Shoaibi 2024: 8). But, at the same time, one could hold that COVID-19 CTs are true! And, crucially, one could appeal to events such as the Tuskegee Experiment as *evidence* for the existence of a Big Pharma conspiracy. This is no mere hypothetical: RFK Jr. and his antivax think tank 'Children's Health Defence' promoted the documentary 'Medical Racism: The New Apartheid' specifically towards Black Americans. Specifically, viewers were warned that 'in black communities something is very sinister' and 'the same thing that happened in the 1930s during the eugenics movement' is happening again.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, the very same political genealogy (i.e. the one highlighting the Tuskegee Experiment and the subjugation of black and brown communities throughout history) can be coupled with two distinct epistemic genealogies about antivaccine CTs. And depending on which epistemic genealogy we choose, we get different results in terms of what *kind* of world-travelling we should engage in (or, better, whether we should even engage in world-travelling in the first place).

Also note that this sort of 'genealogical hijacking' has implications for (i) and (iii) (Shoaibi's two other insights). Shoaibi argues that political genealogies reveal that believers of COVID-19 CTs (for example) operate in a primarily oppressive environment and such CTs can be used to further bolster the oppressive nature of that environment. But, again, this only works in one assumed that COVID-19 CTs are bunk. If they're not, then it could be that these communities track the truth (about COVID-19) *because* they are oppressed.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, if COVID-19 CTs are true then these communities are oppressed *in spite of* these CTs beliefs

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<sup>16</sup> Quote in <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/06/08/1004214189/anti-vaccine-film-targeted-to-black-americans-spreads-false-information> (accessed 28/12/2024).

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps in the vein of observations often made by standpoint epistemologists (for a recent overview see Toole 2021).

which, it could also be argued, are even liberatory in giving these communities the capacity to track truths that would otherwise be concealed.

So I take it that political genealogies contribute two things: they *emphasize* the relevant social and political conditions, and (as noted) they have normative force in the sense that they encourage us to engage with the relevant communities.<sup>18</sup> But, to hammer the same point again, it seems to me that this can only happen on the backbone of a robust epistemic genealogy. If not, malicious actors (in this case, the antivaccine industry) can take advantage of the social and political conditions that foster legitimate vaccine hesitancy to push for their own antivaccine messaging. Political genealogies must first make assumptions about the epistemic genealogies of the relevant beliefs (i.e., whether they are debunked or vindicated) *before* they offer a recommendation on how one should engage with the communities that hold these beliefs. Simply put, they first need to ‘get the epistemic details right’. This, to my mind, illustrates the primacy of epistemic genealogies.<sup>19</sup>

## 6. Future Research

In this piece I considered Shoaibi political genealogies. Despite welcoming the invaluable insights delivered by political genealogies (and being sympathetic to Shoaibi’s suggestions on world-travelling) I took issue with Shoaibi’s suggestion that epistemic genealogies are unable to capture what’s problematic about unwarranted, but safe, CTs. In response, I sketched that there are at least three promising strategies available to the proponent of epistemic genealogies. I also noted that epistemic genealogies have primacy over political genealogies, since political genealogies can be potentially hijacked by malicious actors (or, in less value-laden terms, because the very same political genealogy can involve different normative upshots depending on the kind of epistemic genealogy it is based upon). I also suggested that we should be pluralistic about the different genealogical methods we adopt when we evaluate CTs.

Based on the above discussion, the following issues concerning the application of genealogical methods to the domain of CTs seem to warrant more attention in future research:

- (1) How should we *model* genealogical arguments as they apply to CTs?
- (2) What are the different *types* of genealogical arguments one could use to evaluate CTs?
- (3) Are epistemic genealogies *primary*? (Do other genealogies have to *presuppose* some epistemic genealogy to properly fulfil their function?).

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<sup>18</sup> See here Shoaibi’s (2022) related work on the function of grassroots community activism.

<sup>19</sup> I take antivaccine CTs (along with Shoaibi) to be bunk (for genealogical, and other, reasons). Obviously, my point about the primacy of epistemic genealogies does not hang on this specific empirical assumption.

(4) How do different genealogical methods *interact* with one another?

(5) What is the role of *epistemic* and *moral values* in genealogical arguments as they apply to CTs?

I've already sketched some responses to some of these questions. About (1) I suggested explanationism. About (2) I made a list of provisional candidates by drawing from different literatures on genealogical debunking. About (3) I suggested that epistemic genealogies are primary. About (4) I considered the possibility of political genealogies being *themselves* subject to *epistemic* genealogical debunking (which, to my mind, further reinforces their primacy). But it seems that there's conceptual space for all kinds of interactions that deserve exploration. For example, perhaps certain epistemic genealogies are subject to political genealogical considerations (thus effectively reversing the strategy I used in section 5).<sup>20</sup> And, finally, about (5) one could suggest that different genealogies can be coupled with different sets of values thus delivering different kinds of world-travelling.<sup>21</sup>

For example, political, possibilizing, and deconstructing genealogies arguably fall under the same genus of 'critical' (Harcourt 2024) genealogies but diverge on the kind of normative upshot they deliver. So perhaps one could put forward a critical genealogy about CTs by adopting a different kind of world-travelling than the one that Shoaibi proposes. At any rate, there's a lot more room for work on genealogies and CTs. Shoaibi's political genealogies, despite some of my reservations, are an extremely important contribution to that literature.

### Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Nader Shoaibi and Julia Duetz for their extensive and very valuable written comments. I have also greatly benefited from discussions with M Dentith and Maria Mourtou-Paradeisopoulou.

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<sup>20</sup> It could be argued that epistemic genealogies must also rest on robust meta-epistemic foundations which can be disputed (given that we're operating in a context of 'hostile epistemology'). And one salient way of casting doubt upon these foundations is by highlighting the political dimensions that give rise to epistemic genealogies. Many thanks to Julia Duetz for inviting me to consider this possibility (which deserves serious consideration).

<sup>21</sup> For the interplay between different kinds of values in conspiracy theorizing see Virvidakis (2022). A corollary issue here is what kind of 'meta-normative' principles are assumed by debunking strategies and what is the status of these assumptions (recall fn. 19) (e.g., see Kyriacou 2016; Bourget and Mendelovici 2023).

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