https://timhayward.wordpress.com/2017/10/18/whos-afraid-of-conspiracy-theory/

Who's Afraid of Conspiracy Theory?

Posted on October 18, 2017by timhayward

"Conspiracy theory" is frequently used as a derogatory term, a term of disdain and implicit criticism. An effect of this is to discourage certain kinds of legitimate critical inquiry. But surely, in a world where conspiracies happen, we need good theories of what exactly is happening. The only people who really have anything to worry about from conspiracy theories are conspirators who stand to be exposed by them. For the rest of us, if someone proposes a far-fetched theory, we are instinctively sceptical; if they propose a theory that accounts for some otherwise unaccountable occurrences, they may be helping us learn something.

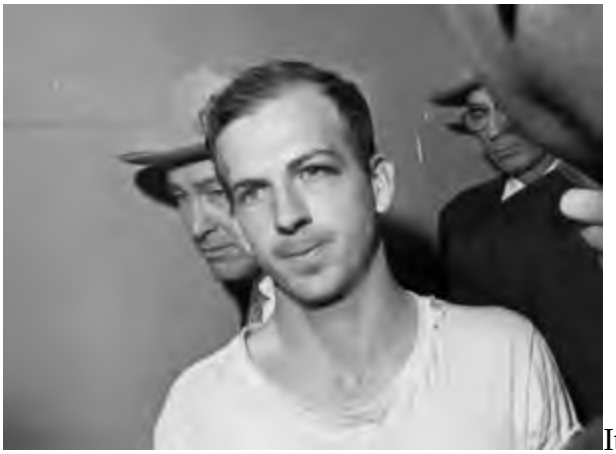
Of course, people can sometimes be misled by conspiracy theories, but people are misled by the beliefs that conspiracy theories challenge too. This betokens a need for careful scrutiny of controversial contentions quite generally. Obviously, a conspiracy theory is only a theory unless there is also proof. But it is one thing to demand the truth of a theory be proven; it is quite another to pronounce that such a theory can never be accepted as true. Unfortunately, even academic critics fail to observe that clear distinction, with some of them going so far as to condemn conspiracy theories in general, pre-emptively.[1]

Yet what are denigrated as "conspiracy theories" are quite often legitimate lines of inquiry pursued in a spirit of critical citizenship, with the aim of holding to account those who exercise otherwise unaccountable power and influence over our lives, including in ways we are not all always aware of.

My argument, then, is that a kind of inquiry that can be intellectually respectable and socially necessary is far too readily sidelined with the categorisation of it as "conspiracy theory". However, since the name has stuck, I propose we should embrace the designation and push back from the sideline to show how it **is possible to engage in conspiracy theory using credible methods of research**.

The problem that concerns critics, in fact, is a kind of extravagantly speculative activity that involves believing untested hypotheses. This can appropriately be called *conspiracism*.[2]

Conspiracism designates a fallacious mode of reasoning that reduces questions of explanation to posited conspiracies, without properly investigating the evidence. Conspiracists are prone to see conspiracies everywhere, and to believe what they think they see, without giving sufficient consideration to alternative explanations. What is wrong with conspiracism, though, can be specified by reference to standards of inquiry set by good conspiracy theory. So the two things could hardly be more different.

 It is especially important to be aware of the difference, given how it has been effaced in public discussions. Early ideas about a "*conspiracist mindset*", from Harold Lasswell and Franz Neumann, informed Richard Hofstadter"s influential study of the political pathologies of the "paranoid style" in the 1960s. This association of conspiracy suspicions with irrationality and paranoia was then actively promoted in the United States, especially, and as Lance deHaven Smith notes, "**the conspiracy-theory label was popularized as a pejorative term by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in a propaganda program initiated in 1967**."[3] The program, created as a response to critical citizens" questions about the assassination of J F Kennedy, "called on media corporations and journalists to criticize "conspiracy theorists" and raise questions about their motives and judgments." Its reach has extended greatly since.

Professor Peter Knight of Manchester University, who heads a major international interdisciplinary research network, funded by the European Union, to provide a comprehensive understanding of conspiracy theories, takes it to be a now generally accepted fact that "some of **the labelling of particular views as "conspiracy theories" is a technique of governmentality**."[4]

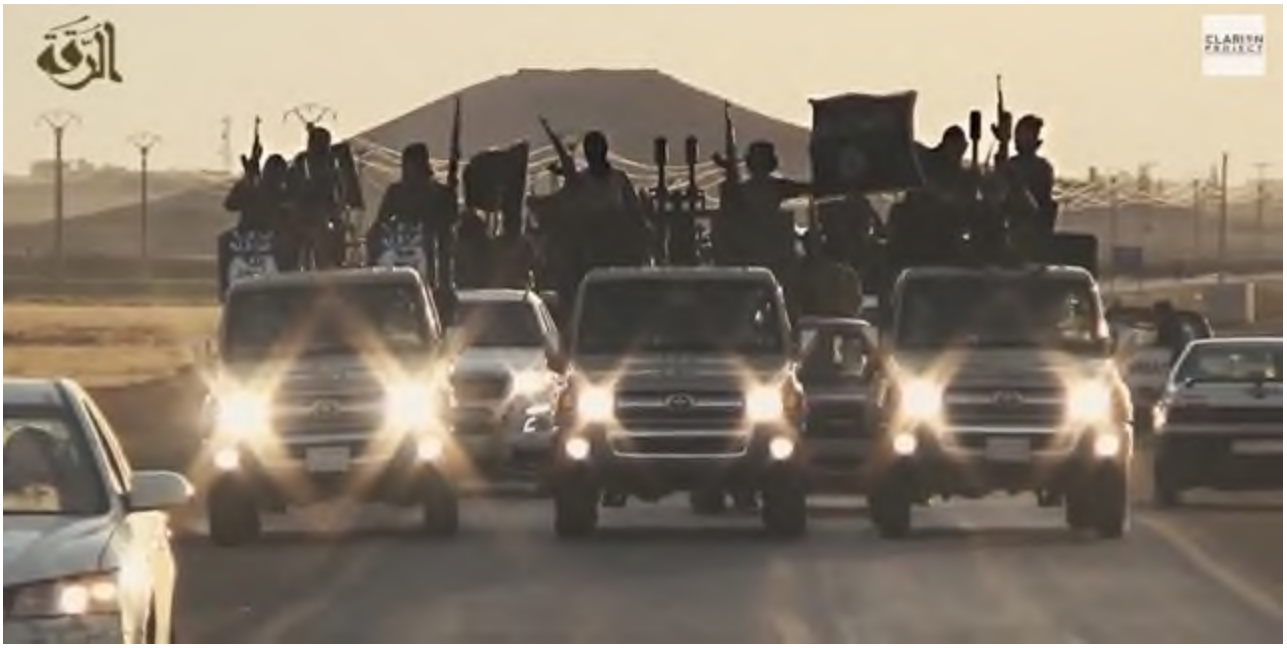
So who"s afraid of conspiracy theorists? Is it possible that certain governments want us all to be?

It is interesting to note that Professor Knight thinks that if serious conspiracy theories can sometimes be on the right track, then perhaps what they are finding should not be thought of as conspiracies. For instance, he writes, "it is possible that different parts of the labyrinthine U.S. intelligence agencies were involved with some of the 9/11 attackers in contradictory and ambiguous ways that fall short of an actual conspiracy, but which nonetheless undermine the notion of complete American innocence." The point is, those contradictions and ambiguities merit study, whatever they are called. Knight"s tantalizing idea of an "involvement" that "falls short of an actual conspiracy" brings me in mind of analogous definitional questions that were raised about Bill Clinton"s descriptions of his "involvement" with a White House intern. Good sense suggests that what people are interested to know is what happened, not what someone calls it. Ultimately, the serious conspiracy theorist – or theorist of conspiracies, as Knight puts it – wants to know what is going on, and hypotheses about "involvements" of all kinds can figure in the inquiry.[5]

We should bear in mind too, that the very name of this field was bestowed upon it by those who sought to pre-empt its development. Its actual practitioners might think their activities could be

more aptly designated in one or more of a number of other, albeit less catchy, ways, such as, for instance, critical civic investigation, intellectual due diligence, investigative journalism, critical social epistemology, or critical social theory.

Which brings me to my main reason for speaking out in defence of the activity: as citizens we find ourselves increasingly struck by anomalies and inconsistencies in official and mainstream accounts of public affairs, not to mention in matters of foreign policy. But whenever we try to share our concerns in a public forum, there seem to be people there ready to harangue us with put-downs about being crazy conspiracy theorists. The reason why they do this is something I shall reflect on another time.[6] My point for now is that we have been drawn to conspiracy theory for reasons that are very far from crazy.



Notes

[1] There is a marked tendency in certain literatures to take this generalized approach to conspiracy theories. Several philosophers – including David Coady, Charles Pigden, Kurtis Hagen, and Lee Basham – have commented critically on it, with Matthew Dentith, in particular, criticizing the failure of such approaches to consider the possibility of finding merits in particular conspiracy theories. He provides examples of "generalist positions which take the beliefs or behaviours of some conspiracy theorists as being indicative of what belief in conspiracy theories *generally* entails." (Matthew Dentith, "The Problem of Conspiracism", *Argumenta*, [*forthcoming* in 2017]) An example is Douglas and Sutton who state that "in the main conspiracy theories are unproven, often rather fanciful alternatives to mainstream accounts"; they also argue that conspiracy theorists are likely to believe conspiracy theories because they are more likely to sympathise with conspirators. (Karen Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton, (2011) Does it take one to know one? Endorsement of conspiracy theories is influenced by personal willingness to conspire", *Psychology*, 50(3), 2011: 544-552.)

[2] On this, I endorse the recent exposition offered by Matthew Dentith (ibid): "recent philosophical work has challenged the view that belief in conspiracy theories should be considered as typically irrational. By performing an intra-group analysis of those people we call ‘conspiracy theorists’, we find that the problematic traits commonly ascribed to the general group of conspiracy theorists turn out to be merely a set of stereotypical behaviours and thought patterns associated with a

purported subset of that group. If we understand that the supposed problem of belief in conspiracy theories is centred on the beliefs of this purported subset – the conspiracists – then we can reconcile the recent philosophical contributions to the wider academic debate on the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories." He identifies the challenge I am arguing we need to take on: "Typically, when we think of conspiracy theorists we do not think of people who theorised about the existence of some particular conspiracy – and went on to support that theory with evidence – like John Dewey (who helped expose the conspiracy behind the Moscow Trials of the 1930s), or Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (who uncovered the conspiracy behind who broke in to the Democratic National Committee Headquarters at the Watergate office complex in the 1970s). Instead, we think of the advocates and proponents of weird and wacky conspiracy theories ... ."

[3] Lance deHaven Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*, University of Texas Press, 2013: p.21; see also Chapter 4 *passim*.

[4] Peter Knight, "Plotting Future Directions in Conspiracy Theory Research", in Michael Butter and Maurus Reinkowski, eds, *Conspiracy Theories in the Middle East and the United States,* Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014: p.347.

[5] "Involvements" amongst people can include any of the typical elements of conspiracy such as collusion, collaboration, conniving, tacitly understanding, secretly agreeing, jointly planning, acquiescing, turning a blind eye, covering up for, bribing, intimidating, blackmailing, misdirecting or silencing, and many other more nuanced kinds of arrangement.

[6] In a third blog of this series I shall be asking "Do we face a conspiracy to curtail freedom of expression?" Meanwhile, the second will be a discussion of "Conspiracy theory as civic responsibility". A full academic paper comprising extended versions of each of these will be available shortly. *(And yes, for afficionados who are wondering, there will be a full response to proposals of "cognitive infiltration" to "cure" us. I may even suspend my reputed politeness ☥)*