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WHY DO WE BELIEVE IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

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Why Do We Believe in Conspiracy Theories?

Michael Butter

Conspiracy theories claim that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces. They assume (1) that nothing happens by accident, i.e., everything has been planned, (2) that nothing is as it seems, i.e., the conspirators are operating in secret, and (3) that everything is connected, i.e., that there are links between people, events, and organizations that escape those who do recognize the secret plot (Barkun 2003: 3-4). Conspiracy theories are currently everywhere. Some people believe that the coronavirus is a biological weapon intentionally released to reduce the world population. Others contend that 5G technology created the virus and that this is now kept secret. Still others are convinced that the virus does not exist or is quite harmless. They think that the crisis has been intentionally manufactured by the WHO and the Gates Foundation to implant everybody with microchips, or by George Soros and his allies to accelerate the “Great Replacement,” the substitution of the Christian population of Europe with Muslim immigrants, or by the German government to implement a dictatorship.

But why do people believe in conspiracy theories? There is not straightforward answer to this question because the reasons differ across time and space. In the first part of this paper, I will explain why people believe in conspiracy theories in the contemporary western world, that is, in an environment where conspiracy theories are quite popular but also stigmatized. In Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States, it is not considered normal to believe in conspiracy theories, which is why in these countries people consider them a problem and ask the question which I try to answer here: why do people believe in them, nevertheless?

In the second and shorter part, I will explain why people believed in conspiracy theories in North America and Europe in the past and why they believe in them these days in Central and Eastern Europe and the Arab countries. Most of the functions of belief in conspiracy theory that I identify in the first part are also important for these past times and different regions, but there is one important additional factor to consider. Let me spill the beans here already: It used to be normal to believe in conspiracy theories in the western world and it still is today in other parts of the world. And if epistemic and other authorities tell you that this is how the world works, you tend to believe it – independent of any psychological or other factors.

Although it might sometimes not feel like it, “we do not live in an age of conspiracy theories and have not for some time” in the western world (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 110-11). Even in United States where conspiracy theories are currently more widespread and accepted than in western and northern European countries, conspiracy theories remain stigmatized. They may have a palpable effect in a court of public opinion but not in a court of law, as Donald Trump’s lawyers learned when the lawsuits they filed, claiming that the election had been rigged, were quickly dismissed by judges all over the country. But why, then, does every second American believe in at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver and Wood 2014), and why does about one third of the German population possess what researchers call a conspiracy mentality (Roose 2020)?

CONSPIRACY THEORIES INSIST THAT HUMANS ARE IN CONTROL OF EVENTS

To begin with, conspiracy theories preserve an outdated but nevertheless attractive notion of human agency. By crediting human beings with the ability not only to know their own intentions, but to put them into practice, they understand them as autonomous individuals rather than subjects in the sense of the modern social sciences, which emphasize the material and ideological constraints that govern people and determine their subjectivity. Conspiracy theories thus are a powerful remedy for what Tim Melley (2000) has called “agency panic,” the widespread fear that gained traction over the course of the twentieth century that humans are just the playball of forces beyond their control. Conspiracy theories insist that human beings are in control of events by discarding explanations that highlight

chaos, stupidity, or systemic effects. A large part of their attraction is their ability to connect disparate things and to reject coincidence and contingency in favour of coherence and sinister purposes.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES HOLD HUMAN AGENTS RESPONSIBLE

According to the large body of psychological studies on the subject, this is because conspiracy theories satisfy two universal human needs. Firstly, evolution has trained the human brain to make connections and recognize patterns. This tendency, which drives not only conspiracism, but also other psychological phenomena such as prejudice, developed because it guaranteed the survival of the species. Secondly, conspiracy theories, as already mentioned, hold human agents and their intentional actions responsible for the events in question because this, too, once was an evolutionary advantage. Accordingly, when conspiracy theorists today claim that everything is connected, that there is no such thing as chance and that everything that happens was planned that way by somebody, they are giving expression to a deeply human tendency that makes evolutionary sense, but is at the same time misleading. As Rob Brotherton, on whose account of the evolutionary roots of conspiracism I have been drawing here, dryly puts it, “The pattern-detection software built into our brain is exquisitely sensitive, but there’s no built-in quality-control program to keep it in check” (2015: 171). Our brains are inclined to see connections even where there are none, for example when two phenomena occur simultaneously or in quick succession by coincidence. They are also wont to perceive intent where none exists. While many of us understand that this needs to be kept in check, others do not. For them, it is easier to accept that a group of malevolent conspirators are controlling our destiny than to accept that nobody is pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Regarding their psychological profile, there are two groups of people in the contemporary western world that are particularly drawn to conspiracy theories: People who feel out of control and who feel powerless are drawn to conspiracy theories to explain the fact that they are not being heard and that there might be developments underway that they are unhappy with. What is important to note here is that the subjective perception of the situation is the decisive factor. Objectively, these people may or may not be powerless or

out of the control; the fact that they feel so is what draws them to conspiracy theories. Such theories are therefore not necessarily, as Parent and Uscinski have put it, “for losers” (2014: 130), but for those who feel that they are or who are afraid of becoming losers.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES REDUCE COMPLEXITY

Moreover, people who have trouble accepting insecurity and ambiguity are drawn to conspiracy theories because they reduce complexity and provide straightforward answers. This is why conspiracy theories became so visible when the European countries went into the first lockdown in the spring of 2020. It was a moment of profound insecurity for all of us. In those weeks in March, nobody knew what our lives would look like in a week or in a month. Moreover, we were faced with rapidly changing information. Scientists knew little about the virus at that time and came up with new insights every week. Accordingly, their recommendations and the rules imposed by governments changed, and sometimes contradicted earlier suggestions and claims. In Germany, for example, we were first told that masks would not help and could even be counterproductive, but a little later wearing them was recommended and finally made obligatory. In this situation, conspiracy theories were an easy way for some people to resolve the apparent contradictions and calm their insecurity. The conspiracy theories remained stable – and have remained so ever since – and they clearly identified those allegedly responsible and outlined their goals and strategies. By translating people’s vague and often undirected fears into a concrete one by grounding it in an alleged plot, they also equipped some people to deal better with the pandemic. After all, they now knew what was going on and who was to blame.

THE NEED FOR SCAPEGOATS

Believing in human culprits behind the coronavirus crisis and other alleged plots has an added advantage. It allows one to point your fingers at somebody and hold them responsible. This is impossible if one accepts that bad luck and chance played a key role in bringing about the global pandemic and much harder to do if one identifies more complex developments such as globalization or the destruction of nature, which puts wild animals in ever closer proximity to humans, as important factors. In other words, conspiracy theories

enable the identification of scapegoats. In contrast to the scapegoat theory of anthropologist René Girard, however, where it is generally a single individual who is cast out of the community, conspiracy theories always focus on several people, in what could be described as a collective form of “othering.”

Somewhat paradoxically, at least at first sight, the identification of scapegoats lends an almost utopian dimension to conspiracy theories. This may at first sound surprising, given that the scapegoats of conspiracy theories are not weak people already located at the margins of society but allegedly omnipotent enemies whose plots are already well advanced. However, since the developments feared by conspiracy theorists are caused by human beings, they are confident that they can also be stopped by human beings. Anyone who recognizes that the causes of migration, whose effects are currently the subject of such intense debate all over the world, are highly complex, will not believe it possible to reverse this trend in the foreseeable future. Likewise, anyone who views the proliferation of alternative models to the heterosexual partnership as a complex, gradual transformation of our society, prompted by a wide variety of factors, understands that this change is unstoppable. By contrast, anyone who sees migration as part of a conspiracy by a small group of bankers who are simultaneously driving the transformation of sexual and gender norms in order to weaken the Western nations will have a different attitude. To them, there is every possibility of stopping and reversing these damaging changes. It is “simply” a matter of exposing and defeating the conspiracy – a perfectly conceivable prospect given conspiracy theory’s insistence on human agency. To the conspiracy theorist, therefore, it is nearly always the eleventh hour, but never too late. There is always still just enough time to stop the plot.

THE “GOOD VICTIMS”

Just as conspiracy theories demonize the group of alleged conspirators, so they idealize the group supposedly targeted by the conspiracy. In historian Dieter Groh’s pithy phrase, conspiracy theories provide an explanation for why “bad things happen to good people” (1987). It is the emphasis on victimhood that makes one’s own group appear good per se. The dualistic, positively Manichean world view that informs all conspiracy theories emerges here particularly clearly. The fact that the group in question is being targeted by conspirators

is a sign of its moral integrity. Moreover, casting one's own group as the victims of a devious plot can have an unburdening effect: It allows conspiracy theorists to put a positive spin on their own problematic characteristics. If somebody rejected Barack Obama as president because he was black, and was bent on preventing Hillary Clinton from succeeding him because she was a woman, they exposed themselves, quite rightly, to accusations of racism and sexism. If they saw Obama and Clinton as puppets of the New World Order, on the other hand, they could shrug off such criticisms, at least in their own mind. The same goes for German conspiracy theories that stoke resentment against refugees. If migrants are not coming to Germany out of dire necessity, but as part of an insidious plan, resistance to their presence is not an expression of prejudice, but a perfectly justifiable response.

WHY CONSPIRATIONALISTS ARE FEELING THEMSELVES "SPECIAL"

Finally, because it is no longer normal to believe in conspiracy theories in the Western world, believing them and especially spreading them allows people to reassure themselves that they are special. They can claim for themselves that they are part of a small elite of people who have understood what is really going on and how the world really works. Whereas most people are "sheeple" – a merger of "sheep" and "people" – they think that they have woken up and opened their eyes. This explains, by the way, why it is often so difficult to talk to committed conspiracy theorists. Confident that they know much more than you, they often are rather condescending when challenged about their ideas. And since belief in one or more conspiracy theories is so central to their sense of identity, and since challenging the conspiracy theory thus threatens their sense of self, they usually cannot be reached by conclusive counterarguments. In fact, empirical studies have shown that confronting conspiracy theorists with such counterarguments often only strengthens their beliefs. (Zollo et al. 2017).

Whereas most of the functions that belief in conspiracy theories performs – insistence on human agency, erasure of chaos and contingency, reduction of ambiguity and complexity, and the identification of scapegoats – were important in previous centuries already, setting oneself apart from others through belief in conspiracy theories only became possible in the second half of the twentieth century. Most scholars agree today that there are important

precursors in ancient Athens and Rome, but that modern conspiracy theories emerged during the Early Modern period (Zwierlein 2013). Importantly, from their first appearance in the fourteenth and fifteenth century until the late 1950s, it was perfectly normal to believe in them throughout the western world. That half of the American population and a third of the German one are drawn to conspiracy theories may strike us as a lot, but had there been polls in 1921 or 1821, they would probably have found that more than 90 percent on both sides of the Atlantic believed in them. Conspiracy theories were not part of a counter-discourse that challenged officially accepted versions of events but part of the official discourse. They were believed by ordinary people as well as by elites and had a significant effect on events.

As the historian Bernard Bailyn (1967) demonstrated during the 1960s already, conspiracy theories played a crucial part in bringing about the American Revolution. The growing conviction that the English king and his ministers were engaged in a sinister plot against liberty legitimized their resistance for, among others, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who both actively articulated this conspiracy theory. Their propensity to perceive the world in conspiracist fashion was fueled by a specific epistemology of cause and effect that maintained that the moral quality of an action was identical with the intention behind the action (Wood 1982). A few decades later, the Republican Party fought not against slavery as such but against what its members called the “Slave Power,” that is, the influence of the most powerful slaveholders over national politics. According to Abraham Lincoln and many others, the leaders of the Slave Power were secretly orchestrating events to not only preserve slavery in the South, but to introduce it everywhere in the United States. In his famous “House Divided” speech from 1858 Lincoln identified the current president, his predecessor, the chief justice on the Supreme Court and an influential member of Congress as the masterminds behind this plot (Butter 2014). To give one last example, during the 1950s the majority of Americans and the leaders of both parties thought that the country was the victim of large-scale communist subversion orchestrated in Moscow. This alleged conspiracy was regularly discussed in Congress and laws were passed to contain it (Heale 1990).

In Europe, conspiracy theories were equally popular and influential. Accusations that the Freemasons and the Illuminati had caused the French Revolution circulated everywhere in the early nineteenth century (Oberhauser 2013). In France, the Jesuits then increasingly dominated the conspiracist imagination (Cubitt 1993); in Germany, the Catholics were regarded with suspicion. In the second half of the nineteenth century, conspiracy theories focused more and more on socialists and communists, and of course on the Jews. After World War I, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, claiming to document the Jewish plans for world domination, reached immense popularity. Their anti-Semitic conspiracy theory became the official state ideology in Germany between 1933 and 1945, leading directly to the Holocaust.

HOW CONSPIRACY THEORIES BECAME STIGMATIZED

From the Early Modern period until far into the twentieth century, then, it would have been pointless to ask for psychological or demographic factors related to belief in conspiracy theories. Such theories certainly performed important functions for individuals and groups, but people mainly believed in them because everybody did. If parents, teachers, epistemic and other authorities again and again articulate the belief that conspiracies drive history, one has very little chance but to believe that this is how the world works. Believing in conspiracy theories ceased to be normal in the Western democracies during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The exact trajectory of their stigmatization – the transformation from officially accepted, orthodox into heterodox knowledge – has only been studied in detail for the United States (Thalman 2019). It is very likely, however, that it must have occurred in many European countries in a similar way. The problematization of conspiracy theories began within the social sciences and spread from there through the whole culture. In the years after World War II scholars started to challenge conspiracist knowledge in two different ways. Writing under the impression of the war in Europe and the Holocaust, émigrés from the Frankfurt School such as Adorno (1950) stressed the potential dangers of conspiracy theories for democracy. Scholars like Karl Popper (1956) criticized the epistemology of conspiracy theories, arguing that they overestimated intentional action and underestimated systemic conditions and structural effects.

These studies did initially not have much impact outside of the ivory tower, but their ideas were picked up a few years later by a younger generation of scholars. Against the background of the Red Scare in the United States, scholars like Seymour Martin Lipset (1955) and Edward Shils (1956) sought to counter the widespread allegations that liberal scientists and intellectuals were puppets in a Soviet plot. These studies reached a much broader reception because their authors wrote in a far more accessible way. Moreover, many liberal journalists, who also worried about the effects of the Red Scare, picked up on their ideas and popularized them. Consequently, conspiracy theories lost their status as orthodox knowledge and moved to the margins of society. By the 1970s conspiracy theorizing had been so utterly stigmatized that the term “conspiracy theory” itself had become insult (Knight 2000: 11).

Of course, the process of stigmatization did not affect all western democratic countries equally, and in some countries, conspiracy theories have become more accepted again in the meantime in public discourse. Even more importantly, however, the stigmatization of conspiracy theories appears to have been largely restricted to the western world. We know hardly anything about the historical development of conspiracy theories in Asian, African, and Arab countries before or after 1945, because the few existing analyses focus exclusively on the contemporary period. But the picture that emerges from these studies is quite clear: In many non-western cultures, conspiracy theories remain an orthodox form of knowledge. Throughout the Arab world, for example, conspiracy theories are a firmly established in mainstream political discourse. They are articulated by all kinds of politicians and as well as the established media (Gray 2010). In similar fashion, recent work on Turkey (Gürpınar 2020) or Russia (Yablokov 2018) stresses that conspiracy theories have not only been an integral part of public discourse in these countries for many decades but have even gained in popularity and importance in the past years. In other words, then, in these countries and, more generally, in Central and Eastern Europe as a whole, the process of stigmatization did not take place or only in a very limited way, and belief in conspiracy theories remained – to varying degrees, of course – normal.

To conclude, then, we are not living in an age where conspiracy theories are exponentially growing – neither because of the emergence of the Internet, which, as most scholars agree,

only led to a modest increase in conspiracy theories (Butter 2020) nor because of the current pandemic. And only because it is not normal to believe in conspiracy theories in most Northern American and European countries does it make sense to ask why there is a considerable number of people who believe in them anyway. These people are not paranoid or otherwise mentally ill, as earlier research suggested at times (Hofstadter 1964), but conspiracy theories perform important functions for their identity. Importantly, we know that belief in conspiracy theories ceased being normal when insights from the social sciences began to permeate western societies. And we also know that the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories decreases with the level of education. Thus, the task for the future is clear: If we teach more people how politics works and how conspiracy theories argue, there is a fair chance that the number of those drawn to such explanations will decrease again in the future.

Professor Michael Butter is the author of *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020). This article draws on arguments far more fully developed in this book.

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