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About the illustrations

The illustrations on the cover of and within this issue are made by Samuel Peelen.

*We wish to show appreciation
to Dr Justine M. Bakker
for her work and the guidance given to us.*

Contents

<i>Editorial</i>	7
<i>Introduction</i>	8
Can a Conspiracy Theory Be the True Story?	15
<i>Kyra Appel</i>	
Our New Paradigm: The Conspiracy Theory of Society Revisited	23
<i>Saar Boter</i>	
When Dog Whistles Fall on Deaf Ears	31
<i>Samuel Peelen</i>	
Is QAnon the Newest Lovecraftian Work?	39
<i>Ries Aalders</i>	
The Epistemological Similarities and Differences Between the Conspiracy Theory QAnon and the New Religious Movement the KKK	47
<i>Lucas Lievens</i>	
Is Conspiracy Against Women in the Workplace Irrational? A Review of Current Workplace From the Perspective of Feminism and Irrationality ...	55
<i>Yeha Jung</i>	
Is the Allure of Conspiracy Theories Based on Their Supposed Irrationality? ...	63
<i>Kirsty Crook</i>	
Harmful Conspiracy Theories - A Small Price to Pay?	69
<i>Laura Schranz</i>	
COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: Reasons for Emotions in Politics	79
<i>Evi Bongers</i>	
How Should Professional Journalism Deal with Conspiracy Theories?	89
<i>Nell Meister</i>	
The Logic of Conspiracy Theories: A Mathematical Analysis of a 9/11 Conspiracy Theory	91
<i>Nienke Wessel</i>	
Is Everything We Know a Conspiracy Theory?	107
<i>Elia Rossi</i>	
<i>Conclusion</i>	115

Editorial

Dear Reader,

The edited volume in front of you is a special edition of *Splijststof*, the journal of the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies at the Radboud University of Nijmegen. The volume consists of a collection of essays that are the final product of the second-year bachelor's course 'Project'.

The purpose of this course is to train the students in research, presentation, writing, and cooperation skills on the basis of an overarching topic. Each student formulates a specific research question related to this topic and writes an essay about it. Peer feedback is a pivotal part of this process. Besides every student's individual effort and contribution resulting in a collection of essays, the students work towards composing an edited volume, which now lies before you.

The volume you are holding is a collection of essays concerning the overarching theme "Conspiracy Theories". This collection was written and produced under the guidance of Dr Justine M. Bakker. This particular volume was selected (out of a total of eight edited volumes) by a jury to be published by *Splijststof*. This special issue is the eighth of its kind, and hopefully, many more will come. I wish you as much reading pleasure as I had.

On behalf of the editorial team,

Mireille Kouevi
Editor-in-chief of Splijststof

Introduction

The government is trying to put microchips in us via the corona vaccine! This statement or statements much like it have been circling social media since the start of the pandemic. These theories, also called conspiracy theories, have been very present since the rise of social media. They are, however, not new. The term “conspiracy theory” has been around since 1870, when it was first mentioned officially in the report of a quarterly meeting of the Medico-Psychological organisation (Robertson 1870). According to a study done by Andrew McKenzie-McHarg in 2018, in the nineteenth century, the term “conspiracy theory” simply suggested the possible existence of a conspiracy. At this time, it, thus, did not have any connotations, neither negative nor positive. Nowadays, however, most people see conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists as inherently irrational. An example of a definition that points to irrationality as a defining feature of CTs is proposed by philosophers Robert Brotherton, Christopher French and Alan Pickering (2013). They describe conspiracy theories as follows: “A conspiracy theory is an explanation for an event or situation that invokes a conspiracy by sinister and powerful groups, often political in motivation when other explanations are more probable.” David Coady states the following concerning how people view conspiracy theories in his text “Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational?” (2007, 193): “It is widely believed that to be a conspiracy theorist is to suffer from a form of irrationality.” At the same time, conspiracy theories are very popular nowadays. Many conspiracy theories are well known by many people, for example, the theory that the first moon landing did not happen but was a hoax staged by NASA or that al-Qaeda did not do 9/11 but that it was an inside job.

Even though conspiracy theories are quite popular, the mainstream media often writes them off as irrational. Unfortunately, this causes people to not think about conspiracy theories any further than irrational stories only believed in by “misinformation spreaders” (Robson 2020).

This volume of essays endeavours to research the connection between conspiracy theories and irrationality. Another aim of this volume is to invite people to look at conspiracy theories in a way that differs from the way the mainstream media generally does. The main priority of this volume is to show that it is worth it for people to investigate conspiracy theories further without immediately dismissing them as irrational.

Please note that we will henceforth refer to conspiracy theories as CT(s) for no reason other than to improve the readability of the texts.

Outline of the Volume

This volume consists of a number of works regarding CTs. It is not a collection of case studies per se; instead, this volume addresses questions such as: What is a CT? When is

a CT successful? These questions will be answered using both recent examples as well as insights derived from different branches of philosophy. Furthermore, this volume investigates the label ‘irrational’ that CTs traditionally receive: Are CTs necessarily irrational and, by extension, are the people who believe in CTs irrational?

To dig deeper into the phenomenon of CTs and their connection to irrationality, this volume takes on different approaches to CTs. For the clarity of the volume, it is useful to start with the essays about the definitions of CTs. Therefore, the first two essays are focused on defining CTs and their related concepts. Kyra Appel explores the requirements a CT needs to have to be labelled as such in “Can a Conspiracy Theory Be the True Story?” (chapter 1). This essay answers the question of whether a story most people believe to be true can also be counted as a CT. In “Our New Paradigm: The Conspiracy Theory of Society Revisited” (chapter 2), Saar Boter is more focused on the definition of the CT of society in connection to newfound access to information.

After the two essays focused on definitions, this volume continues with more practical essays that investigate case studies of CTs and their connection to irrationality. In “When Dog Whistles Fall on Deaf Ears” (chapter 3), Samuel Peelen answers the question of whether it is irrational to believe that dog whistles are a form of hate speech used to manipulate how speech is conveyed in different groups. This essay uses the philosophy of language to give a clearer insight into CTs and irrationality. Ries Aalders uses the comparison to fiction to provide another perspective in “Is QAnon the Newest Lovecraftian Work?” (chapter 4). This essay connects the case study of the CT of QAnon to the writer HP Lovecraft to uncover why believing in CTs is so attractive to people. In “The Epistemological Similarities and Differences between the Conspiracy Theory QAnon and the New Religious Movement the KKK” (chapter 5), Lucas Lievens also focuses on QAnon. However, instead of focusing on literature, this essay elaborates on the similarities between QAnon and the terrorist organisation called the Klu Klux Klan. In “Is Conspiracy Against Women in Workplace Irrational?: A Review of Current Workplace in the Perspective of Feminism and Irrationality” (chapter 6), Yeha Jung focuses more on conspiracies than CTs. This essay connects the subject of conspiracy to feminism and discusses whether there is a conspiracy against women in the workplace. Kirsty Crook uses a case study in order to answer why people find CTs so alluring in “Is the Allure of Conspiracy Theories Based on Their Supposed Irrationality?” (chapter 7). This chapter connects the allure of CTs to their presupposed irrationality. In “Harmful Conspiracy Theories - A Small Price to Pay?” (chapter 8) Laura Schranz gives an insight into the consequences of CTs. This essay critiques the philosopher Juha Räikkä’s utilitarian approach to CTs by focussing on the consequences of CTs. Evi Bongers focuses on scientific reason as the

*Are CTs necessarily irrational
and, by extension, are the people
who believe in CTs irrational?*

guiding principle in public policy during the COVID-19 pandemic and the influences of the guidance of science on CTs in “COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: Reasons for Emotions in Politics” (chapter 9). This essay also offers insights into why CTs are seen as irrational compared to scientific evidence.

Next to the essays that included definitions and case studies, this volume also encompasses essays that look at CTs more abstractly. In “How Should Professional Journalism Deal with Conspiracy Theories?” (chapter 10) Nell Meister looks into the connection between CTs and journalism and answers the question of how professional journalism should handle CTs. In “The Logic of Conspiracy Theories: a Mathematical Analysis of a 9/11 Conspiracy Theory” (chapter 11), Nienke Wessel goes more into depth about CTs and modal logic; particularly, she investigates whether modal logical representations of CTs can tell us anything about their (ir)rationality. Elia Rossi ties everything together and asks a very broad question with regard to conspiracy theories in “Is Everything We Know a Conspiracy Theory?” (chapter 12). With these chapters, this volume tries to give an extensive insight into the connection between CTs and irrationality.

What Is a Conspiracy Theory?

Before we can continue with these essays, the reader should become familiar with the definitions at the core of this volume: what is a CT and what is irrationality?

Many philosophers have thought about CTs and their definitions. As a result, many definitions of CTs exist. The Cambridge Dictionary, for example, gives the following definition of a CT: “a belief that an event or situation is the result of a secret plan made by powerful people” (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). However, because this volume consists of philosophical essays, it does not use the definition from the dictionary. Instead, the two main definitions of CTs used in this volume are the ones

provided by philosophers Brian Keeley and David Coady. According to Keeley, CTs are the following: “A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal

Some academics argue that a prima facie scepticism of intellectuals towards CTs is justified. We aim to challenge this notion.

agency of a relatively small group of persons, the conspirators acting in secret” (Keely 1999, 116). Coady’s definition is different from Keeley’s. According to Coady, “[a] conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of a historical event, in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event that it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an “official” explanation of the same historical event” (Coady 2003, 199). We do not use one single definition but rather these two different

definitions to emphasise the different ways people think about CTs. If it is the case that an essay does not use one of these main definitions to describe CTs, this will be explained in that essay itself.

What Is Irrationality?

Irrationality is another concept that is important to define before going into the essays themselves. The main definition used when talking about irrationality in this volume is not a philosophical one. When talking about irrationality, this volume uses the definition given by the Cambridge Dictionary: “the fact of not using reason or clear thinking” (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). This definition is a broad one since the absence of reason and logic can take on different forms. Nevertheless, this also holds true for conspiracy theories. This definition poses no problem for our volume, as it rightly sets a broad scope of irrational behaviour/thinking. If an essay uses a different definition for irrationality, this will be explained in the essay itself.

Conclusion

Now that a definition of the key terms “conspiracy theory” and “irrationality” has been provided, we proceed toward the final statements of this introduction. The case studies described in this volume might come across as peculiar. Some academics argue that a *prima facie* scepticism of intellectuals towards CTs is justified (see Clarke 2002). We aim to challenge this notion. Throughout this volume, it will become clear that we cannot categorise all conspiracy theorists in the same mistrusting, radical group. The motivations of those who believe in CTs will differ from theory to theory and from person to person. Philosophy of language, political philosophy, analytic philosophy, ethics and philosophy of logic all contribute to a broader understanding of CTs. Although conclusions may differ across our papers as a result of the wide range of approaches we have chosen to take, this only goes to underline the underlying message of this volume: the focus on the perceived inherent irrationality of CTs is questionable and fails to treat CTs as the multidimensional subject that it is.

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The Daily B

Sunday, August 30, 2021

Murder by "vaccines"!

In recent months millions of COVID-19 vaccine shots have been distributed worldwide. As expected and foretold, these "vaccines" have done more harm than good, leading to

The experimental drug developed by and among others, caused an array of symptoms

within hours of their injection. The

symptoms observed include dizziness,

hallucinations, visions of

the growing of various

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craving for shrimp,

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constantly experiencing a slightly

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Can a Conspiracy Theory Be the True Story?

Kyra Appel

According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, a conspiracy theory refers to a theory or explanation that features a conspiracy amongst a group of agents as a central ingredient (Pauly 2020). In this definition, it is not implied if the theory is wrong or right. Nowadays, however, when talking about a CT, an epistemic deficit is often implied. This can also be seen in another definition of CTs where they are described as: “an explanation of an event or situation that invokes a conspiracy by sinister and powerful actors, often political in motivation, when other explanations are more probable” (Brotherton, French, and Pickering 2013). Most philosophers do not agree with this definition and see a CT just as a theory about a conspiracy without stating anything about its righteousness.¹ The philosopher David Coady sees CTs as explanations that are opposed to the official explanations of an event at a given time. It is, however, the case in some instances that a CT turns out to be true. An example of such a theory is the Snowden case: After the revelations of Edward Snowden, it is now clear that there really was a conspiracy in the NSA that was spying on American citizens. Now almost everyone believes that CT is true. However, can one still call it a CT in that situation when the CT becomes the theory most people believe to be true? That is why in my essay, I am going to answer the research question: “Does a CT cease to be a CT if it becomes the official story?”

This question is of importance to the complete volume. People think of CTs as irrational, this can be seen in the definition Brotherton, French and Pickering (2013) give for CTs. This essay will demonstrate that CTs can also be the official stories of an event. This means that not all CTs are as irrational as people seem to think.

Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories

Before we dive into the example of the Snowden case, it is important to line out some definitions that are important in answering the question stated in the introduction. The first definition is the definition Coady gives to define the difference between CTs and official stories. According to Coady (2003), a big feature that is a requirement of a CT is that it conflicts with the official explanation. Coady gives the following three-part definition to clearly distinguish CTs from official stories:

A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of an historical event, in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to

¹ Philosophers who agree with this definition are Brian Keeley (1999), Matthew Dentith (2016) and Pete Mandik (2007).

bring about the historical event which it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an “official” explanation of the same historical event. (Coady 2003, 199)

This would mean that, according to Coady, an official story can never be qualified as a CT, no matter how conspiratorial it is.

A Conspiracy Theory That Turned out to Be the Official Story

Even though according to Coady, official stories cannot be seen as CTs, there are also instances of CTs that were CTs first and turned out to become the official stories. An example of this is the CT that the National Security Agency² of the United States was using the technology of their secret surveillance network to spy on more than a hundred million phone calls of American citizens. It was also rumoured that the NSA spied on citizens for American corporations, even though this was in violation of the rights

However, since the NSA consistently denied these accusations by making many public denials about its engagement in cyber espionage, the accusations remained merely accusations.

of those citizens. However, since the NSA consistently denied these accusations by making many public denials about its engagement in cyber espionage, the accusations remained merely accusations. The theory that the NSA was spying on the citizens of the United States thus stayed a

CT. Both of the definitions mentioned above can be applied in this case. The theory that the NSA was spying on citizens was both a CT in the way that it was a theory about a conspiracy and in the way that it clashed with an official story. This, however, all changed on the 6th of June in 2013. On this day, *The Guardian* reported on a secret NSA programme of the US to collect domestic telecommunications metadata from Verizon Business Networks Services³ (Landau 2013). A day later, *The Guardian* also revealed details about the NSA’s use of PRISM, a programme that targeted the stored data and internet communications of non-US persons that live outside the United States. After this revelation, more leaks followed, talking about the US spying on Chinese computers. It was also leaked that the NSA had been eavesdropping on communications of political leaders who were attending the London G20 summit of 2009 and that the NSA had been collecting metadata from domestic communications on the internet (Landau 2013). All these revelations came from government documents that were classified, and they came to light because of Edward Snowden.

2 The National Security Agency is also called the NSA.

3 Verizon Business Network Services is a company that provides technology services (Eipstein 2014).

He was an employee at Booz Allen Hamilton, an American information technology consulting and management firm. Snowden provided the documents needed to prove that the NSA was spying on citizens because he was concerned over the NSA's collection of citizens' personal data. According to Snowden (2013):

When you see everything, you see them on a more frequent basis, and you recognise that some of these things are actually abuses ... eventually, you realise these things need to be determined by the public, not by somebody who is merely hired by the government.

Snowden believed that more was being collected by the NSA than the laws of the United States actually justified. This was why he leaked the documents that eventually showed that the NSA was, in fact, spying on US citizens as conspiracy theorists had thought before. This is an example of a time where an explanation of an event that was a CT before actually turned into the official story.

Conspiracy Theories as Theories about Conspiracies

When looking at the Snowden case using Coady's definition of CTs, the Snowden case would no longer count as a CT, because it is now part of the official story. However, Coady's definition of CTs and official stories clash with the definition that a lot of other philosophers have of CTs. This definition is that a CT is just that: a theory about a conspiracy. An example of a philosopher who thinks of CTs in this way is the philosopher Brian Keeley. Keeley gives a clear definition of conspiracy theories as a theory about a conspiracy. He states the definition of CTs as the following:

A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons, the conspirators acting in secret. (Keeley 1999, 116)

According to Keeley, it is of importance that the group of conspirators is small, although he does not define how many people have to be involved for a group to count as small. Another addition Keeley made to this definition is that the group of conspirators is powerful and has bad intentions. An additional big difference between Keeley and Coady is that Keeley is of the opinion that sometimes a CT and the official story about the same situation can be clashing CTs. Keeley's definition of CTs thus clashes with Coady's notion that an official story can never be a CT.

Warranted and Unwarranted Conspiracy Theories

Although both philosophers have very different definitions of CTs, both those definitions do not necessarily imply if a theory has to be wrong or right to be considered an official story. Even though Coady makes a difference between CTs and official stories, he does not state that official stories have to be right to be counted as such. Keeley, however, does include a distinction in his theory between CTs that could be right and CTs that are definitely wrong. He calls this distinction the distinction between warranted and unwarranted CTs. In his article "Of Conspiracy Theories"

(1999), Keeley gives an explanation of what an unwarranted CT entails. Firstly, a UCT⁴ is an explanation that runs counter to the official story. Opposed to any UCT is the official story that the CT has to cast doubt upon. Secondly, UCTs want to tie together seemingly unrelated events. Thirdly, UCTs are unfalsifiable because all data against the UCT can also be twisted in favour of it. This also causes the group of conspiracists who, according to the conspiracy theorists, have something to do with it to get bigger and bigger. This is because more instances have to get involved as conspirators to make sure that the CT does not get falsified. It is thus the case that if there are way too many institutions or people involved in a CT, the chances are big that it is a UCT. The more people are involved in a plot, the less likely it is that the plot is actually true, according to Keeley (1999). If a CT does not contain any of the things that make it an UCT, the theory can be seen as warranted instead.

Looking at Snowden Using Coady and Keeley

It is thus the case that some explanations of certain events that were seen as CTs before turned out to become the official story. Does this then mean that these theories cease to be CTs? If one looks at the Snowden Case using the definition Coady has when considering the difference between CTs and official stories, it is easy to say that the Snowden Case is now not a CT anymore. It is the official story now, and an official story cannot be a CT, according to Coady. This would mean that the only two requirements a theory has to have to be a CT are involving a conspiracy and not being the official story. But this would mean that a lot of theories that seem quite likely, like, for example, Watergate, are CTs instead, just because they are not an official story in the eyes of, for example, a government. Hence, Keeley's definition of CTs is more helpful. A CT is a CT if it is a theory about a group of agencies acting in secret. This is why, according to Keeley's definition, if a theory was a CT first and the official story later, like in the Snowden case, it does not cease to be a CT even though it is now the official story. This is because it still counts as a theory about a conspiracy. When we look at the Snowden case, it is clear that the NSA spying on US citizens is a theory about a conspiracy, and this does not change, even though this story is now widely accepted, instead of only suspected by a few conspiracy thinkers.

Unwarranted Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories

It is, however, the case that most people nowadays think that believing in CTs is irrational, so it can be difficult to believe in some official stories if they are still seen as CTs. Nevertheless, it is the case that not all CTs can become official stories. There are still CTs that clash with the official story, like in Coady's definition of CTs. The only difference is that now the clash between a CT and an official story can be between an

4 UCT is short for unwarranted CT. In his text "Of Conspiracy Theories", Keeley also makes use of the abbreviation UCT.

unwarranted CT and a warranted CT. The warranted CT can, in this situation, become the official story, and the unwarranted CT cannot. This ties into Keeley's definition of CTs, which states that an official story can clash with an unwarranted CT. This way of looking at CTs can also be explained using the example of the Snowden case. The Snowden case has nowadays been established as an official story. This does not mean, however, that the official story is actually true.

When looking at the Snowden case with Keeley's definition, it becomes clear that the Snowden case is still a CT according to that definition. Because it is still a theory about a conspiracy, this CT has been given proof in favour of its being true by Edward Snowden and is now seen as the real story by a lot of people. It could, however, still be false. It is the case that a lot of CTs that are not counted as the official story also have proof in favour of it. For example, the proof that people give that the earth is actually flat. The only difference between the Snowden case and the CT that the earth is actually flat, is that the Snowden case is an example of a warranted CT. There were no seemingly unrelated events that were being tied together in the case of the NSA spying on citizens. With Snowden, it is also the case that only one institution had something to do with the conspiracy. This means that the CT could also easily be falsified if it turned out not to be true because only one instance is involved. It is also the case that there was proof of the CT given by Edward Snowden that could either be falsified or unfalsified. This is a very important aspect of a warranted CT. It is thus the case that the Snowden case can still be seen as a CT even though the explanation of the event has become the official story. It is just a warranted CT instead of an unwarranted one.

*The more people are involved
in a plot, the less likely it
is that the plot is actually
true, according to Keeley.*

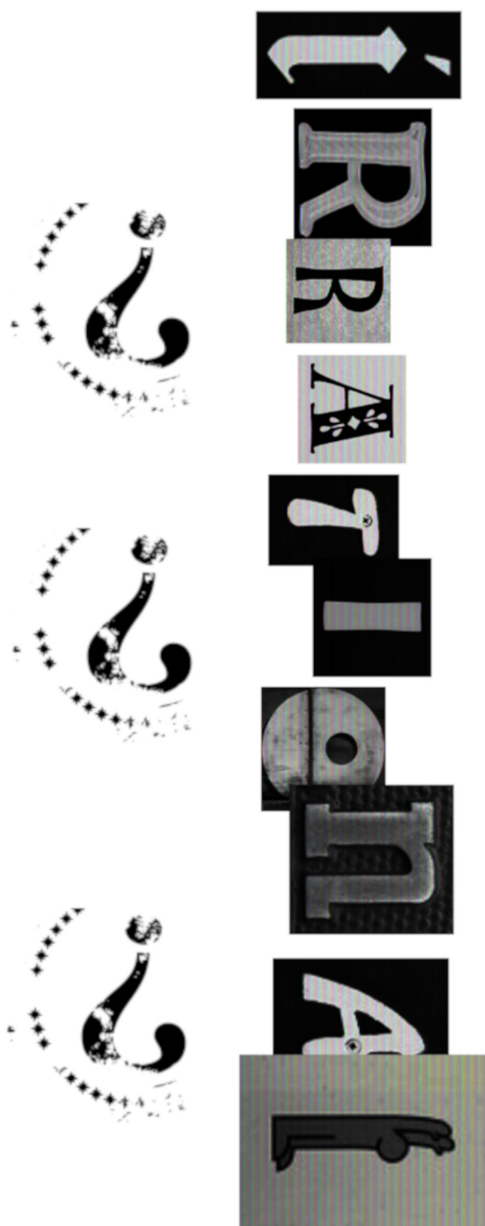
Conclusion

The definition that people have for CTs varies per person. The philosopher Coady is of the opinion that a CT is a theory that is opposed to an official story. Philosopher Keeley disagrees with this definition and is of the opinion that a CT is, just as it says: a theory about a conspiracy. When looking at this definition, it can be said that all theories about conspiracies are CTs, even if that CT turns out to be the official story in the end. Keely is, however, also of the opinion that there is a difference between warranted and unwarranted CTs. Unwarranted CTs are CTs that are unfalsifiable and try to put together events that are actually not related at all. Unwarranted CTs can never be official stories and can still clash with official stories. In this essay, both Coady's and Keeley's definitions were used to answer the question: "Does a CT cease to be a CT when it becomes the official story?" To answer this question, we applied both theories to a particular case of a CT that later turned into the official story. Namely, the Snowden case. Because of Edward Snowden, the CT that the NSA was

spying on US citizens was proven to be true. This CT then turned into the official story. After applying both theories to this particular case, it was then concluded that even though this CT is now the official story of the NSA spying, this does not mean it ceases to be a CT. This is in disagreement with Coady's definition of CTs. It is, however, the case that not all CTs have the ability to become official stories. Some CTs are unwarranted, and those CTs can never be the official story. Warranted CTs do, however, have the ability to become official stories. They can even clash with other unwarranted CTs. So the clash between CTs and official stories, as Coady states in his definition, is not gone. The only difference with his definition is that a CT can be a CT and an official story at the same time. The CT is then just a warranted CT instead of an unwarranted one.

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Our New Paradigm: The Conspiracy Theory of Society Revisited

Saar Boter

Introduction

Nowadays, conspiracy theories are more popular than ever. This has also come to the attention of political scientists (Moore 2018). The internet has provided an easy way to share ideas and information that can contribute to the development of a CT. This newfound interest by both internet conspiracy theorists and researchers in the scientific field begs the question of how thoughts on The Conspiracy Theory of Society, using the definition by Charles Pigden, might change considering the state of our current civilisation. Pigden defines this notion of The Conspiracy Theory of Society as the idea that it is often appropriate to cite conspiracies in the explanation of events (Pigden 2019, 23). He argues throughout his work on this phenomenon that conspiracies are often part of history, among other explanations. In other words, Pigden argues that it is not irrational to look for a conspiracy in the explanation of a certain event since it is possible it was caused by one.

Now that it is clear why revisiting this debate is relevant, let us construct a brief overview of the debate itself, starting with Karl Popper. Popper started the earliest philosophical debate on CTs (Coady 2019, 4). He argues against something he calls “The Conspiracy Theory of Society”. This theory proposes, according to Popper, that behind *every* historical event is a conspiracy. Popper disagrees with this theory and therefore critiques it in his work. Pigden comments on Popper, saying that the idea of The Conspiracy Theory of Society is not entirely untrue and argues that Popper is simply not using the appropriate definition. Pigden blames Popper for using a definition that is too absolute since Pigden sees an actual danger in doing so. This absolute nature of the definition makes it easy to denounce the general idea that conspiracies can be behind historical events, which creates a smokescreen for actual conspiracies and gives CTs a bad connotation, deeming them and everyone that believes them irrational.

Almost thirty years after Pigden’s response to Popper, it only seems necessary to revisit this debate and view it from our new historical context. One great contemporary change is the usage of the internet. The internet provides us with the possibility to share information like never before. Even though experts are still debating whether this new possibility causes a rise in CTs, the possibilities are there (Andrade 2020, 514). However, the internet does not solely give an option for a rise in the spread of CTs. The means to uncover a conspiracy have become greater as well because of the transparency the internet gives us. The internet is a giant database full of information, and it is very easy to access information on government business, among other things. With this, the demand for more transparency has also grown (Meijer 2009, 258-259). These two notions are the biggest differences between a time with access to

the internet and one without that access. Overall, this means that CTs and conspiracies have gotten a more prominent place in our society. This change begs the question: “Does our newfound access to information affect the definition of The Conspiracy Theory of Society?”

This paper will first go into Popper’s and Pigden’s definitions and thoughts on The Conspiracy Theory of Society to make clear what the debate is about. Then, we will dive into an analysis of our current world using a case study of a website called WikiLeaks. Finally, we will answer the question of whether this newfound access to information affects the definition of The Conspiracy Theory of Society and in what way. This paper hypothesises that we have a different view on the theory than Popper and Pigden had in their respective times.

Defining Our Terms

Within every field of research, but especially within philosophy, defining our terms is an important starting point. The terms we will be defining are “conspiracy” and “theory”, and from there, we will arrive at a definition for “conspiracy theory”. For this, I will be using the definition by David Coady. This definition comes from the volume Coady edited on the debate between Popper and Pigden. The reason for choosing Coady’s definition is that he has studied the debate between Popper and Pigden and can therefore provide us with a definition that works in this specific context, keeping both Popper’s vision and the ideas of Pigden in mind.

Coady (2019, 1-3) tackles the problem of defining as follows. The notion “conspiracy theory” consists of the words “conspiracy” and “theory”. A conspiracy

A conspiracy is a group of people acting together, usually secretly. It can be easy to add an element of bad intentions though that is not always the case and therefore not inherent to the definition.

is a group of people acting together, usually secretly. It can be easy to add an element of bad intentions though that is not always the case and therefore not inherent to the definition. There have been groups that conspired to do something we would view as ethically unjust, but there are also examples of conspiracies that tried to do something that

was ethically just, for example, a group of people conspiring together to overthrow a vicious dictator.

Then, a theory is a possible explanation. In the case of The Conspiracy Theory of Society, a possible explanation of how a historical event took place.

Putting these two together, you arrive at a definition that entails that a CT is an explanation of a historical event that postulates the existence of a group of agents acting together in secrecy. This is the definition this paper will use for the term “conspiracy theory”.

Karl Popper

Popper is very clear about his definition and opinion on the notion he named “The Conspiracy Theory of Society” [Pigden’s capitalisation] (Popper 2019, 13-15). Popper defines it as follows:

It is the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed) and who have planned and conspired to bring it about. (Popper 1966, 94)

While this is a clear definition that consists of one single sentence, it does raise some questions that Pigden addresses and tries to clarify in his paper. Let us first, however, look at what Popper himself has to say about his notion.

To describe the concept he talks about, he starts by comparing it to the relationship between the Gods on Olympus and the Ancient Greek people. The Gods were constantly looking down on the people and meddling in their conflicts, or even causing them, having full control, and exercising that control over what happened in Greece. In *The Conspiracy Theory of Society*, those Gods have been replaced with influential men in powerful positions (Popper 2019, 11).

Popper talks about this theory from his point of view on what the goal of social sciences is. He argues that it is up to the social sciences to explain not only the wanted and desired consequences in life, but also the unwanted and unforeseen ones. He argues that if you come up with a completely ready-made CT, you are ignoring the important fact that the unforeseen and unwanted consequences of actions are a huge part of social life. In contrast, CTs always consist of a group plotting to bring about a *wanted* outcome. Therefore, stating that every historical event is the result of a group bringing about the exact outcome they intended leaves no room for any unwanted situations, which poses a problem, according to Popper. Even though the context he speaks from is that of the social sciences, Popper’s definition of the notion is very clear and absolute and is therefore not limited to the realm of social sciences.

Popper finishes his plea against *The Conspiracy Theory of Society* by saying that these conspiracy theorists view institutions, like governments, for example, as these carefully designed concepts that have accounted for everything and are therefore capable of constructing many conspiracies. This is, according to Popper, not the case (Popper 2019, 15).

Charles Pigden

Pigden writes about his ideas on *The Conspiracy Theory of Society* in response to Popper’s ideas, which are unnuanced and evoke questions, according to Pigden (2019, 17-43).

Pigden thoroughly examines every part of Popper's explanation of his definition of the notion. This paper will not go into all of those since there is not enough room for that, but it will touch upon the biggest points of criticism that Pigden has so we have a proper view of where their differences lie.

Pigden starts by stating his ideas about CTs and conspiracies. Pigden defines the terms as follows:

A conspiracy is a secret plan on the part of a group to influence events partly by covert action. Conspiracies therefore can be either good or bad depending on the purposes, circumstances and methods used. Conspiracy, as I use it, is not necessarily a pejorative word. However, in a democracy where politics is supposed to be above board, there is perhaps a presumption (but no more) that conspiracies are morally suspect. (Pigden 2019, 20)

This definition is quite similar to the one Coady uses. However, Pigden does note something interesting about the role of politics, stating that transparency in politics is important. This point of transparency will return when we discuss the role of the internet in our current society.

Pigden also introduces us to the concept of the cock-up theory of history, which proposes that the most likely explanation for the occurrence of an event is inadvertent error or incompetence. It seems like this concept is the opposite of what a CT entails. This is not always the case, however. Imagine you are planning to conspire against a government, and everything goes according to plan, except the last step to overthrowing the government goes wrong, which

He argues that if you come up with a completely ready-made CT, you are ignoring the important fact that the unforeseen and unwanted consequences of actions are a huge part of social life.

lands you and your fellow conspirators in prison. Note how, even though this event was brought about by a conspiracy, it was just as much of an error. As Pigden reminds us, and rightfully so, a failed conspiracy is still a conspiracy (Pigden 2019, 17-18). The point of adding this nuance is that Pigden wants to break down the idea that it is irrational to believe in conspiracies, the idea that Popper fuels.

Pigden goes on to talk about the bad connotation CTs have and where that connotation comes from. Not surprisingly, Pigden points at Popper. His work and ideas on CTs have made it seem like CTs are inherently irrational and should not even be considered an optional explanation of events. Not only is this unfair, but it is also actively harmful, argues Pigden, since it creates a smokescreen for right-wing conspirators. This is due to the fact that they can use the denunciation of the public to hide

their very real plans (Pigden 2019, 18). Even though Pigden does mention the negative view people have of CTs in his definition, as cited earlier, a clear distinction must be made between the idea that a conspiracy is inherently evil and the idea of Popper, meaning that CTs are not meant to be taken seriously. If anything, if conspiracies are inherently evil, this is an argument for the fact that we should be taking them as serious threats.

From that point on, Pigden focuses mainly on critiquing the definition Popper has chosen for The Conspiracy Theory of Society and proposing more nuanced opinions. The biggest problem Pigden has with Popper's definition is the fact that he says the explanations of historical events are *always* brought about by conspiracies. It is easy to disagree with this definition, Pigden argues since it is so absolute. Besides that, according to Popper, the discovery of the conspirators is all there is to the explanation of the event in question. The entire context is being left out of his argument. Another point Popper seems to make is that if The Conspiracy Theory of Society were true, all history would be made up of successful conspiracies. If he thinks this is part of the notion of The Conspiracy Theory of Society, it does contradict the cock-up theory of history. Critiquing the definition, Pigden ends this argument with the fact that he thinks that Popper is "denying something that nobody asserts", referring to the fact that he argues that no one would ever argue for an absolute definition like the one Popper proposes (Pigden 2019, 20-22).

The greatest difference between the definitions is that Popper claims that it is rarely correct to explain an event as a result of a conspiracy that wished to bring about that particular event. Maybe the event that took place was influenced in a way by a conspiracy, but unintended outcomes are the general rule. Pigden himself, on the other hand, claims that conspiracies are often among other causes of historical events. He claims that a conspiracy *can* bring about a historical event (Pigden 2019, 26). This new view on The Conspiracy Theory of Society is what we will be using to look at our current world and analyse whether this definition suffices or needs adjustments based on that.

New Paradigm

There is no hard evidence to suggest the number of conspiracies has changed recently. However, the internet can help us understand what has happened in the past by providing information on historical events. These observations of past events can help us understand that, even though we may not be aware of them at this time, conspiracies just like ones in the past can theoretically also take place in our current time.

A good example of a website that informs us about the possibility of conspiracies in governments is the database and website called WikiLeaks. WikiLeaks is an online archive that holds state documents focused on the politics in the United States of America, often of confidential nature. They cover topics like the military, econo-

mics, and international politics. This archive makes it possible for every individual to consult the documents. WikiLeaks has secured the safety of materials that could lead to the uncovering of a conspiracy.

What this case can show us is that the internet can provide us with more knowledge on state affairs that are confidential, and it provides us with a way to pressure governments into being more transparent on their political affairs, therefore receiving the opportunity to uncover existing conspiracies. This demand for more transparency and the information websites like WikiLeaks provide us with have an effect on our view on conspiracies and on our opinion of them being behind historical events, which is the main issue in The Conspiracy Theory of Society. Examples of uncovered conspiracies thanks to databases like WikiLeaks are secret CIA experiments and the unjust handling of convicts, as seen in the case of the “torture flights” (Räikkä 2014, 84). By being able to look back at historical events with new information, we have hard evidence to support the claim that conspiracies *can* be behind historical events.

Conclusion

Finally, we can conclude that the definition of the notion as presented by Pigden, the idea that it is often appropriate to cite conspiracies in the explanation of events, is very much acceptable in our current time and age. It is apparent that we can toss aside Popper’s definition of the idea that behind *every* historical event lies a conspiracy,

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just as Pigden has done, for the same reasons. However, we can also provide new arguments for this decision, using the role of the internet. The internet providing the possibility of sharing confidential information of past government decisions to anyone with

an internet connection, combined with the demand for more transparency on past events, shows us that there have been conspiracies behind historical events in our recent history as well. We can use this to argue, just like Pigden, that it is very much possible for a conspiracy to be behind a historical event.

To answer our main question: it is not necessary to revise the definition of The Conspiracy Theory of Society, but our newfound access to information does affect the definition in a way, namely that we have more arguments to argue for Pigden’s definition. Therefore, Pigden’s definition is not only more than acceptable, but in our current timeframe, he could definitely be even more confident with what new definition he proposes.

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When Dog Whistles Fall on Deaf Ears

Samuel Peelen

A dog whistle is a seemingly innocent phrase that discloses something more Machiavellian to the right (or wrong) audience. In politics, dog-whistling is when coded or suggestive language is used to garner the support of one group without alerting the opposing group (Safire 2008, 190). It is meant to be heard only by a specific group, much like dogs are the only ones that can hear the frequency of a dog whistle when it is blown. The term was first seen in the 1980s but has made quite the come up ever since, notably during and following the 2016 American presidential election, predominantly due to Donald Trump's racially charged campaign. While the term has been around for over three decades, the language branch of philosophy has never explored covert speech acts as profoundly as they do today. New speech acts have been acknowledged and labelled, including the act of intentional covert dog whistles (Saul 2018, 1-2). This term describes a dog whistle with no direct evidence of its existence, as it no longer has the intended effect once the public is aware of it being a dog whistle (Vidal and Torices 2018, 93-100). As noted by Jennifer Saul (2018), "success of a covert intentional dog whistle, then – unlike most communicative acts – depends on the audience not recognising the speaker's intention."

One would assume that the mere existence of this speech act would shoot scepticism of the entire concept of covert speech acts sky high. Rationally, it would make sense to disregard the act of covert intentional dog-whistling entirely, as there are only speculations proving its existence. However, while we are aware of the fact of dog whistles, we may be teetering on a thin line between irrational beliefs and genuine covert, mass manipulation. Therefore, this research is relevant, and the question this essay aims to answer: "Is it irrational to believe covert dog whistles are a form of political hate speech that is used to manipulate how speech is conveyed to different groups?" With a primary focus on irrationality as an anchor, this essay will attempt to scrutinise the scepticism towards covert dog whistling and the political and social impact they may carry.

This paper begins with the dog whistles previously exhibited by white American politicians. While this is mostly focused on the United States, it provides clear-cut examples. The 2016 American presidential election shone a spotlight on the usage of hate speech, covert and overt, popularising the concept of dog whistles. An example concerning the nature of dog whistles can be found in the quote, "I am your president of law and order," which Trump utilised when addressing the protests following the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020. This law-and-order strategy used numerous times in the history of US politics convinces voters that uprisings, riots, and crime are a threat that only said mouthpiece could overcome. Alongside this and multiple other prominent examples, the discourse concerning the semantic role in dog whistle communication will be explored to answer the research question at hand.

Dog Whistles Exhibited

The 2016 American presidential election: the event in which the “alt-right” gave rise to an exuberant amount of hate speech and intolerance over the last six years. Or did it? The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) released a report exhibiting the rise of hate crimes in the first days following the election night. The results are staggering; how did Trumps’ rhetoric cause this peak to occur? In the ten days following the election, there were 867 hate incidents that were submitted to the #ReportHate page on the Southern Poverty Law Center social media accounts and website, many of these invoked Trump’s

There are plenty of white Americans who may not self-identify as racist out of fear of being “cancelled” but still covertly agree with racist beliefs. To recruit these groups, a more subtle approach is used: dog whistles.

name. According to the SPLC, the incidents declined over the ten days following the election (Miller and Werner-Winslow 2016). Another report (Edwards and Rushin 2018) shows that “Donald Trump’s election in November of 2016 was associated with a statistically significant surge

in reported hate crimes across the United States, even when controlling for alternative explanations. Counties that voted for President Trump by the widest margins in the presidential election experienced the largest increases in reported hate crimes.”

There were many moments within this anomalous campaign in which Trump’s distaste towards minority groups was not subtle, such as the wonderfully off-the-dome quote:

When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people (Lee 2015).

However, the more concerning nuance in speech lies underneath the already apocalyptic-grade surface level. While Trump had no problem letting his racism shine through, there are plenty of white Americans who may not self-identify as racist out of fear of being “cancelled” but still covertly agree with racist beliefs. To recruit these groups, a more subtle approach is used: dog whistles. As Saul mentions in her work *Dogwhistles, Political manipulation, and Philosophy of Language* (2018), “[t]hey are one of the most powerful forms of political speech, allowing for people to be manipulated in ways that they would resist if the manipulation was carried out more openly— often drawing on racist attitudes that are consciously rejected.” For example, in June of last year, the president declared: “I am your president of law and order.”

This statement on its own holds up just fine; however, this law-and-order strategy has been deployed in US politics before. In this strategy there is often made use of coded language, such as “inner city” which connotes ideas such as “densely populated, high crime, urban area” but also “African-American” to the intended audiences that may already experience racial prejudice (Khoo 2017, 33–64). However, the most notable use of the law-and-order strategy can be found as the embodiment of the war on drugs.

Public enemy number one; at a 1971 press conference Richard Nixon declared the usage of drugs to be America’s number one enemy, only to be eradicated by “a new, all-out offensive,” effectively starting what would be known as the war on drugs. However, this so-called war is merely another brick in an already inherently racist wall. After abolishing slavery in 1865, the economy was in shambles, especially in the post-confederate South (Clark 1966, 424). Fortunately, the thirteenth amendment to the US constitution would provide a solution, as it reads: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” From this section can be concluded that there is a legal loophole for federal prisons to keep slaves and therefore employ prisoners as such. This escape clause can only be assumed to have been a convenient catalyst for black Americans’ mass incarceration, ensuing Nixon’s promise to “restore public order”. While the inherent racism behind this campaign may not be apparent to the naked eye, this quote by John Ehrlichman (Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs under President Richard Nixon) may provide some evidence:

You want to know what this [war on drugs] was really all about? The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalising both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did. (LoBianco 2016)

Ken Mehlman, the head of the Republican National Committee, admitted before the NAACP that the Republican Party had used the Southern strategy for decades (Haney-López 2014, 24). Up until the Civil War, most of the Southern population was Democratic; this quickly shifted, however, due to this electoral strategy used by the Republican Party, in which they appealed to racism against Black Americans to win the white vote. Mehlman’s admission read (Allen 2005): “Republicans gave up on winning the African American vote, looking the other way or trying to benefit politi-

cally from racial polarisation.” The war on drugs, and subsequently, the law-and-order strategy, rapidly fanned the flame of this political realignment of conservative, white voters who had earlier supported the Democratic Party.

In Saul’s work, a prime example she uses is the Willie Horton ad that George W. Bush used in his 1988 campaign. In this ad, the Bush campaign criticised a prison furlough plan that Bush’s opposing presidential candidate, Michael Dukakis, accepted. Willie Horton, a furloughed convict, was discussed in the ad. In said ad Horton’s race was not disclosed; however, there is an illustration in which it is revealed that Horton is African American. Dukakis was ahead in the polls; however, this statistic took

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a nosedive swiftly after being given airtime. At first, this ad was not seen as racist; however, as soon as the public became sceptical of the ad’s racist intentions, its effect wore off. Dukakis once again rose in the polls after this event.

While this example shows how covert speech acts may influence a target audience, it also shows the workings of covert intentional dog whistles. This type of speech act is often found in connotation to racial resentment, also known as “symbolic racism” (Tesler and Sears 2012, 19), which, according to Donald Kinder (1986), is an act showing that “racial prejudice infects contemporary political affairs in pervasive ways.” It also connotes implicit bias, and therefore covert dog whistles are a convenient tool to bypass overt racism. Mendelberg (2001) explains that while vocalising overtly racist ideas was acceptable before the 1960s, doing so now is looked down upon. Hence, dog whistles provide a way to covertly express and buy into racist beliefs.

Dog Whistles vs Semantics

All these examples aside, could it be that covert dog whistles are merely a left-wing misunderstanding? A case of semantic ambiguity? – When observing the Gricean model of communication, it becomes clear that dog whistles and political propaganda reach beyond the four maxims of conversation: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. The limitations of this model concern 1. The conditions under which dog whistles are conveyed are not ideal conditions for communication, and 2. The one using a covert dog whistle does not have the same conversational goal as those who hear it (Beaver and Stanley 2018, 2).

In conversation, the speaker and the receiver are conduits of two phenomena: presupposition and implicature. A presupposition is when the speaker makes certain implicit assumptions about the background of an utterance, which is then taken for granted. So, in the sentence “Donald Trump no longer uses self-tanning lotion,” the presupposition is that he has been using self-tanning lotion and then stopped doing so; the listener will usually not question this. When the speaker in an exchange uses implicature, what they mean differs from what the utterance that is said means. For

example, let us say that the weather has been unpleasant all week, and someone asks you how the weather has been; you begrudgingly reply, “weather’s been fantastic.” Here you can see the use of sarcasm, in which you do not actually mean that the weather has been good, but rather that it has been quite the opposite. A commonality between semantic presuppositions and conversational implicatures is that there is no apt circumstance in which the speaker can deny them (Beaver and Geurts 2014; Torices 2021, 13-14). For example, in the exchange:

(Exchange dealing with a presupposition)

Speaker 1: Donald Trump no longer uses self-tanning lotion.

Speaker 2: I did not know he used self-tanning lotion.

Speaker 1: No wonder you did not know; he has never used self-tanning lotion! (Denial).

In contrast to semantic presuppositions and conversational implicatures, covert dog whistles are not utterances that have to be linked to conventional meaning and can be plausibly denied. Plausible deniability, or “the ability to deny any involvement in illegal or unethical activities, because there is no clear evidence to prove involvement”, is what makes covert dog whistles so powerful; due to the one dog whistling being able to reverse the accusation in their favour (Taegan Goddard’s Political Dictionary n.d.). Along with reaching the ingroup¹ (Sumner 1906), whilst rejecting the outgroup, covert intentional dog whistles work so well as a manipulatory tool because they have this built-in semantic ejector seat: plausible deniability. Even if a politician were to be questioned about a specific dog whistle, they could steer clear of blame and keep their status as a “rational” agent.

Along with sending truth-conditional information, dog whistle communication also deals with the communication of one’s ideological persona to the projected ingroup while unbeknownst to the outgroup. Any covert dog whistle can be used here as an example, as it communicates the speakers’ values regarding racism and xenophobia. For this reason, this conveying of values is also known as an identifying dog whistle (Henderson and McCready 2019, 154-155).

Conclusion

As discussed, dog whistles are used to convey belonging to a certain ingroup while simultaneously spreading messages rooted in hate speech against other groups. Using a distinct method to keep the outgroup clueless and relying on plausible deniability ensures the circumventing of public backlash. While this circumventing and recruiting of the ingroup has become more accessible due to social media and

1 A group characterised by intense bonds of affiliation such that each member feels a sense of kinship and some degree of loyalty to other members by virtue of their common group membership.

memes, the observed examples showcase how harmful dog whistles can be. Acknowledging the hidden messages behind said exhibits cannot be contradicted, as the intentions were either painfully obvious or later outed² by those involved. However, the

As discussed, dog whistles are used to convey belonging to a certain ingroup while simultaneously spreading messages rooted in hate speech against other groups.

problem lies in whether the listener trusts the «rational» dog whistling agent. If said ideological trust is established, the listener will merely be able to agree with the relatable values offered and will not care, or they may even encourage, how problematic the agent's utterances may be. A ray of hope stems from

the example discussed by Saul: The Willie Horton case. As soon as this issue of race was raised, the ad stopped working, showing that once a covert dog whistle is identified, it no longer has an effect. As the evidence gathered shows, it is not irrational to believe covert dog whistles are a form of political hate speech used to manipulate how speech is conveyed to different groups due to them spreading ideological beliefs to ingroups and using this to harm targeted groups.

2 In the case of John Ehrlichman (Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs under President Richard Nixon) on the war on drugs.

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Is QAnon the Newest Lovecraftian Work?

Ries Aalders

Almost everyone has heard the name QAnon at least once, especially during the period that Donald Trump was president of the USA: people might have seen QAnon-followers, otherwise known as Qanists, on the news during Trump rallies, the storming of the Capitol or even at Biden's inauguration; if it concerns American politics on national television banners, T-shirts or caps displaying the letters Q or *WWGIWGA* (Where We Go One We Go All) are sure to fill in the empty corners of your screen. In order to better understand Q and Qanists, I thought we ought to look for similar events; H.P. Lovecraft and his Cthulhu Mythos have shown a lot of similarities with QAnon and will be examined further in this paper. The research question "What similarities exist between QAnon and the Cthulhu Mythos?" aims to reveal the inner workings of QAnon; if we want to get a deeper understanding of conspiracy theories in general, it is a necessity to get a better understanding of the underlying processes.

QAnon

Since the year 2017, an internet user called Q Clearance Patriot (Q), who claims to have access to secret government files, has written a series of short messages on the online message boards *4chan* and, later on, *8chan* (Zuckerman 2021). In short, these messages have promised the occurrence of the following major scenarios: The Storm, which would be a series of arrests made against agents of The Cabal (similar to a shadow government who runs a country in secret), e.g., the Rothschilds, or Hillary Clinton (Zuckerman 2021). Also, The Great Awakening, a series of events in which the wealth of the world is equally distributed among everyone, was said to unfold (Papasavva 2020). Needless to say, not one of these scenarios has taken place (yet). Other predictions made by Q have turned out to be false, like the re-inauguration of Trump in 2021, among others. This begs the question: why, after all these false prophecies, does Q still have such a large, dedicated audience? Is it right to think of Qanists as a dumb, blind mass? No, I do not think so; it reminds me of the masses of people following Howard Phillips Lovecraft, an early 20th-century writer: the terminology, the cryptic writings, and even the message HP Lovecraft and QAnon convey share a lot of similarities. What exactly it is that Lovecraft has written about and the hysteria that ensued because of it is something we will discuss later on. Firstly, I am going to give a more detailed description of what researchers have written about QAnon and its attractive force.

There is still no definite answer to the question of why QAnon has managed to grow to this size, but the answer might lie in the way this particular CT is set up. The way Q communicates with his followers about these doomsday scenarios is

through so-called Qdrops¹: very short, encrypted messages that cannot be understood on their own. It is up to the followers to decrypt, interpret, and weave the Qdrops into a coherent story. Because of this, followers have started to call themselves “bakers, baking bread out of breadcrumbs” (Zuckerman 2021). One can understand that this must be very thrilling indeed, almost as if you are well on your way of completing a very difficult puzzle. Besides that point, this CT still functions like any other when it is met with counterevidence: the Cabal must be a lot slyer than we previously anticipated (e.g. arrests could not have been made because The Cabal messed with the evidence or bribed the head of police).

With these arguments in mind, we can see why people still side with Q. Not only do people walk around with self-fabricated stories, but they also successfully use setbacks to further strengthen their beliefs. Now, a handful of people following – what it seems to be – a false prophet is no reason for panic; there have been a lot of non-violent cults in history. The problem is much bigger, however, when a large percentage radicalises, leading to huge threats to national security: for example, the incident at Hoover Dam, where a former US Marine, a Qanist, had a standoff while being heavily armed (Zuckerman 2021). Even now, with Trump beaten and out of office, Q has found another target: the outbreak of COVID-19 had everyone in shock, and Qanists have since been trying to find a scapegoat for the ongoing epidemic (Drinkwater 2021).

Lovecraft

It has become apparent that Q and everything that Q stands for is problematic in varying degrees: people can isolate themselves and their families from the rest of the world at the very least, while others even go as far as to commit crimes in the name of QAnon (Zuckerman 2021). It is necessary, then, to find a fitting solution to the growing numbers of Qanists: a solution that will not make the problem even bigger. Arresting

*Thus, it is not the individual
that needs to be understood but
rather the line of reasoning.*

and interrogating every supposed Q-fan to see if that individual has extreme tendencies is, of course, only making the problem worse. This would be exactly what Qanists have feared: oppression by the authorities. It would not be so

difficult to spin a story describing how The Cabal is now actively hunting critically thinking individuals, rallying even more people at Q’s side (Zuckerman 2021). Also, trying to discover the identity of Q and restricting his access to these message boards will not be any good since Q is very likely not one individual but rather a whole group of people, all working separately from another under the same name (Papasavva 2021). No, Q seems more like a way of thinking about politics rather than a person

¹ These Qdrops can be found on 4chan and 8chan.

or persons that could be held accountable. Thus, it is not the individual that needs to be understood but rather the line of reasoning. As soon as we understand the line of reasoning, we can use it to our advantage to bring the growing numbers of Qanists to a halt. It is because of this that I have sought out previous occurrences of this kind of CT, e.g., the Cthulhu Mythos Cultists, or CMC for short.

For those who are not familiar with Lovecraft: he was an early 20th century writer, well-known for titles like *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928) and *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (1931). In these stories, Lovecraft paints what came to be known as the *Cthulhu Mythos* or *Lovecraft's Universe*, containing a wild spectrum of The Great Old Ones² and Outer Gods³. The typical Lovecraftian monster or God is an invisible entity that will drive the person who discovers it insane⁴. Not only did some readers fantasise about these creatures actually existing in real life, but entire cults were raised to worship these Great Old Ones, who were mostly inspired by the *Necronomicon* (Harms 1998).

The *Necronomicon*, loosely translated from old Greek, means as much as “book considering (or classifying) the dead” (Joshi and Schultz 2004). The book appears in some of Lovecraft's works like *The Nameless City* (1921), *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928) or *History of the Necronomicon* (1927) and has somewhat of a shady (fictional) origin. According to Lovecraft, the book was written by a “mad Arab”, Abdul Alhazred (a name that makes no sense in Arabic), who originally called the book *Al Azif* (a sound that is supposed to resemble the howling of demons) (Joshi and Schultz 2004); Alhazred was a worshipper of the entities mentioned by Lovecraft, like Yog-Sothoth and Cthulhu. The *Necronomicon* was translated into Latin by the Danish scholar Olaus Wormius (a real scholar, but Lovecraft got his birth and death year horribly wrong). Today, numerous copies are said to exist (this is not confirmed), e.g., in the British Museum and Bibliothèque nationale de France. Lovecraft urges the reader in the *History of the Necronomicon* (1927) to not actively look for the book and definitely not to read it unless you want to meet a terrible end, like so many others before (Joshi and Schultz 2004). Then, in the late 1970s, someone going by the name of “Simon” published an “English translation of the *Necronomicon*” which sold 800,000 copies by 2006 and is now the most popular *Necronomicon* out there (Davies 2010). This

2 The Great Old Ones are the original rulers of the earth, and currently reside in a coma-like state (their exact location is unknown to us). Examples of The Great Old Ones are Cthulhu, Gol-Goroth, Hastur and Yig.

3 The Outer Gods are Gods that surround and are ruled by Azathoth, a blind god in the centre of the Universe (some believe him to be a sentient black hole). Examples of Outer Gods are Azathoth, Nyarlathotep, Yog-Sothoth and Shub-Niggurath.

4 One can imagine that someone would react the same when he or she, after gathering enough knowledge, would become aware of the existence of The Cabal.

version of the Necronomicon is mostly made up of instructions on rituals and curses; also, a battle between good and evil forces is being described, much like the Qdrops from Q.

The presumed existence of the Necronomicon, fuelled by the workings of other authors, gave rise to several Lovecraftian cults, like the Cult of Cthulhu. These cults are mostly international and mainly focused on the worshipping of Lovecraftian Entities, such as Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, Shub-Niggurath and Yog-Sothoth, in the hopes of acquiring forbidden knowledge of the Universe. (Harms 1998). Most Lovecraftian occultists are individuals, however, and do not identify themselves with a larger group, as is self-evident considering the small number of Lovecraftian cults.

Qanists and Lovecraftian Occultists

Now to come back to my research question, “What similarities exist between QAnon and the Cthulhu Mythos?” and my claim is that they are indeed highly similar. We can, without a doubt, state that the terminology used by Q, such as The Cabal, The Storm and The Great Awakening, strongly resemble the terminology used by Lovecraft (e.g.,

The similarities do not stop there, however: both Q and Lovecraft are mysterious authors who write about hidden truths that the public is largely unaware of.

The Great Race or The Shadow out of Time). The usage of such ominous and vague terms is undeniably an attention grabber and holds power to get people’s attention. The similarities do not stop there, however: both Q and Lovecraft are mysterious authors who write about hidden truths that the public is largely unaware of. Also,

both The Cabal and the Lovecraftian Entities supposedly lurk in the dark, secretly manipulating and controlling the way we perceive the world around us: The Cabal do this by threatening powerful people into doing their bidding. Lovecraftian entities prefer manipulation and deceit. The writing style of Q and Lovecraft is similar, too, since they are both very cryptic and rely on personal input from readers⁵; much like the hordes of bakers we see among Qanists, other authors have expanded the Cthulhu Mythos, like A. Derleth, C.A. Smith, R. Howard, and R. Bloch. Both Qanists and

5 Compare the two following texts:

Q: “Where is Huma? Follow Huma. This has nothing to do w/ Russia (yet). Why does Potus surround himself w/ generals? What is military intelligence? Why go around the 3 letter agencies?” (Internet Archive 2017)

Lovecraft: “The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are, and the Old Ones shall be. Not in the spaces we know, but between them, they walk serene and primal, undimensioned and to us unseen. Yog-Sothoth knows the gate. Yog-Sothoth is the gate. Yog-Sothoth is the key and guardian of the gate.” (Lovecraft 1929, 15)

Lovecraftian occultists believe themselves to have better insight into the true nature of the universe than others. Furthermore, in both narratives, we can identify a sort of build-up of tension which will end up being relieved: the Qanists long for The Great Awakening and the Lovecraftian occultists await The Great Awakening of The Great Old Ones⁶. Much like the Lovecraftian occultists, Qanists come from all walks of life; their economic status, ethnicity, age, and gender seem to have no big influence on whether you believe in Q, yes or no.

Not much is known about individual Qanists and Lovecraftian Occultists alike, so it is difficult to say whether they compare on other, more personal levels than just believing in a CT. But we can say that it has become evident that the CT QAnon and the Cthulhu Mythos grossly overlap, even on the more critical aspects like content and communication. It seems as if most of the individuals within these two domains have the shared wish for the world to be more exciting: few would disagree those shadow governments secretly try to bring the world to ruin or monstrous deities roaming the corners of our world and universe do not sound very thrilling. It is thus that Lovecraft is likely not the only example that shows similarities with QAnon; there are probably many others. It would be wise then to refrain from simply calling Qanists “bigoted, dumb and dangerous naïfs”, but rather place it in a spectrum where things like these happen constantly; QAnon just got international attention, and got around faster than, e.g., the works of Lovecraft.

Conclusion

The claim of this paper, that “QAnon and the Cthulhu Mythos hold many similarities”, has been sufficiently supported. It has become clear that QAnon and his followers are nothing new; instead, H.P. Lovecraft (and probably a lot of other narratives) have preceded in this line of thought. The aim of this paper was to help understand the reasoning of the average Qanist about QAnon in the hopes of developing a new way to go about CTs in general; Qanon, like Lovecraft, provides an interesting story in which the reader can be the protagonist. The cryptic messages are set up in such a way that the reader can fully immerse into the narrative, draw their own (biased) conclusion, and take part in the QAnon/Lovecraftian universe. We need to understand that Qanists are only victims of sophisticated rhetorical/psychological devices and are not, like so many people assume, “dumb and blind”. For future research, I would like to

6 The Awakening of The Great Old Ones is described as the following, as seen in *The Call of Cthulhu*: “...and the secret priests would take great Cthulhu from His tomb to revive His subjects and resume His rule of earth. The time would be easy to know, for then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and revelling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom.” (Lovecraft 1928, 42)

propose a deeper insight into the aspects of the narratives I have mentioned in my paper: mysterious authors, cryptic messaging in need of deciphering, a battle between good and evil, and dark forces lurking/manipulating. If it turns out that more CTs use these rhetorical/psychological devices, we could develop programs that arm people against them.

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The Epistemological Similarities and Differences Between the Conspiracy Theory QAnon and the New Religious Movement the KKK

Lucas Lievens

Introduction

Ever since the origination of QAnon in the United States, it has been one of the biggest conspiracy theories to create division in families, friend groups, and Facebook acquaintances. There even is an online forum for people to vent their frustrations and seek help dealing with QAnon family members, with over two hundred thousand members (QAnonCasualties n.d.). Because of the number of people this CT disadvantages, it can be considered a societal crisis. The hostility that this theory ensues originates from the polarising nature of the theories involved, such as believing in a satanic paedophilic elite, Trump as a saviour, and the idea that white people are threatened with extinction (Zuckerman 2019). These theories might seem irrational to the average person. However, history has shown us that irrational theories like the ones mentioned earlier have been around for centuries and, therefore, have had and still have some appeal to people. These different theories throughout time have had the same base ideas, and they just changed what I will later explain to be the other. The Ku Klux Klan (commonly abbreviated to the KKK) is an example of this. They already believed and spread the idea that white people should be protected and promoted that white people are superior for over 150 years (Madison 2020). Because of this correlation between QAnon and the KKK, I will research whether or not the resemblance ends here or whether there are more similarities. This is relevant as there is a big distinction made in society between a conspiracy theorist, which can be regarded as irrational, compared to a Klan member who can be regarded as a terrorist following their new religious beliefs. Seeing this massive difference in a negative connotation to the words, it is important to know if there is enough contrast between the CT QAnon and the new religious movement KKK. To reach an answer to this problem, I will structure my research around the question, “What are the differences and similarities between QAnon and the KKK, and do they deserve a different label in society?”. I will answer this question by firstly giving some background information about QAnon and the KKK; secondly, I will discuss similarities that can be found between QAnon and the KKK. Thirdly I will examine the differences, and then I will form my conclusion.

The connection between my topic of extremism in the KKK and QAnon is interesting to our overarching subject of irrationality and CTs. I argue that it is impossible to reason rationally on the basis of debunked arguments, which is the case for CTs in QAnon and the KKK (Moskalenko and McCauley 2021).

Their History

To determine the differences between QAnon and the KKK, a short introduction to their backgrounds is necessary. Starting with the oldest, the Ku Klux Klan. Founded right after the American Civil War in 1865 (Bond 2011). The Klan has three primary eras. But for the sake of this paper, I will only focus on the Second Klan. The Second Klan came to fruition after the First World War and is characterised by its massive follower count. During the 1920s, the Klan counted about five million members (Madison 2020). This is the biggest they ever got during their 150-year lifespan. The Klan believes that they have to ensure the supremacy of white people above all others. This narrative is reflected in the fourteen words. The fourteen words is a slogan used by white supremacists and goes as follows: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children” (Smeeke 2020, 33-41). They see white people as in danger of being subjugated to another race. I chose the second era of the Klan as they appear to be the best comparison to QAnon for reasons I will explain in the coming paragraphs.

QAnon, compared to the KKK, is in the middle of its adolescence. When the anonymous author nicknamed “Q” started posting on a forum in 2017, the ball started rolling. Q claims that their name stands for a high-level security clearance in the US Government, named “Q clearance”, which is where Q would get their “highly classified” information from (Garry et al. 2021, 5). This information includes that the majority of the government is corrupt and, in some versions of the story, is running a child sex trafficking ring (Zuckerman 2019). The theory of the child sex trafficking ring is based on another CT: Pizzagate. In short, the Pizzagate CT believed that Hillary Clinton and other government officials were running a satanic child trafficking ring in a basement of a pizzeria in Washington DC. This essentially shows a core factor of QAnon. First, they change the narrative of a CT slightly in order to gain more traction and to recruit more followers, and then they incorporate it into their existing system of CTs (Bleakley 2021).

Similarities

There are some similarities that can be found in the period when the KKK and QAnon started to grow exponentially. For instance, the KKK started growing when there were a lot of technological advancements, the gender roles started to shift as women were able to vote, and sex started to get more mainstream through movies. The last two of these mentioned are directly opposing the Christian (especially protestant) values where the man of the house is the decision-maker and where explicitly discussing sex is taboo. There was a lot of turmoil because of these sudden changes. In our current time, we can see the same. More and more inequalities between genders and sexual orientations are being abolished and worked out of the system, while at the same time, music and tv shows targeted at teens/ young adults increasingly revolve around love and sex; however, not in the Christian narrative with abstinence until marriage. The last twenty years have also been defined by technological advance-

ments; the constant changes that go with those advancements can make people feel as if they are not keeping up. For example, some Qanon supporters are sceptical about the upcoming 5G network, which would be a ploy to get more power without having concrete proof, as Mia Bloom describes in her book (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021).

Aside from similar circumstances of the timeframe, the Second Klan and Qanon are distinguished by their substantial follower counts. At the time of the height of the KKK, in the 1920s, their numbers were astonishing. They were essentially a political party in some states and had the backing of five million

QAnon, compared to the KKK, is in the middle of its adolescence.

members. In some communities, these shifts in power happened overnight (Bond 2011, 19). Out of recent polls by The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), the support for Qanon is also overwhelming at the moment. It is estimated that about 14 per cent of Americans believe in the CT (Russonello 2021). This would translate to roughly forty-six million Americans believing in this CT. Thus, both the KKK and QAnon have had massive parts of the population support them. One of the main factors why QAnon is much bigger than the KKK ever was (or ever will be) can be attributed to their use of the online space and their seemingly less radical ideology. This CT being less radical is, of course, not true when looking at events like the storming of the Capitol (Garry et al. 2021).

The massive communities created by QAnon and the KKK are also able to exist as both are Christian-based entities. The historian James H. Madison called the KKK members “[s]everal million white, Protestant, native-born Americans” (Madison 2020) in one of his works. This differs per era of the KKK as the Third Klan had dwindled in numbers so much that Catholic Christians and other Christian, white, American-born members were welcome (Madison 2020). The KKK used anti-Catholic CTs to rile up the Protestant supporters (Madison 2020, 85). In Protestant schools, children were taught that Martin Luther wanted to destroy the corrupt hierarchical Catholic Church with his ninety-five theses (Madison 2020). This narrative drove anti-Catholic narratives and made the jump to join the KKK smaller as the sentiment was already embedded in Protestant education of the time.

Compared to the KKK, QAnon is not as strict in their specific type of Christianity. It is not explicitly mentioned as a Christian CT. However, this can be easily seen when looking at their core beliefs: fear of a satanic elite that controls the government (Garry et al. 2021). This is just the foundation upon which the rest of the theories are built. Many of these follow-up theories are just as extreme and dangerous as the foundation. An example is the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903). This antisemitic propaganda text originating from Russia has been the basis of antisemitic reasoning for the last 100 years. In a few words, it is a supposed report of several conventions by high-ranking Jewish people in which they discussed their plans to achieve world domination (Hagemeister 2008). This is almost identical to the belief of QAnon as

they believe that a satanic global elite, known as The Cabal, is doing the same thing: planning world domination (Zuckerman 2019). As well as the rebranded version by QAnon supporters, the KKK also used the *Protocols* to justify their actions in the past (ADL n.d.). This shows that QAnon and the KKK, at least at an epistemic level, have some of the same disproven sources that they use to strike fear into the public and their supporters. *The Protocols* are obviously used to portray the Jewish population as evil. However, such framing of Jews also made it easier for white supremacists to treat them as lesser because of their religion as they supported something so terrible.

One thing that stands at the core beliefs of both QAnon and the KKK is the

*One thing that stands at the core
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is the demise of white people.*

demise of white people. QAnon supporters and the KKK, for the last 150 years, have believed that minority populations will wipe them out. This is

also the fear where the fourteen words originate from. The shift in power since the abolishment of slavery after the American Civil War in 1865 was one of the factors that led to the creation of the Klan in that same year with the intention to keep the just liberated enslaved people under subordination of white people (Madison 2020, 1).

As said before, one of the places where the KKK and QAnon meet is their white supremacy. Khyati Y. Joshi, a scholar who is revered for her knowledge on intersectional issues of race, religion, and sex, can provide context on the creation of the “other”. In her book *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (Joshi 2020), the “other” entails that people create a separate group of people that do not fit in their picture of themselves. Often this is paired with hostility towards the other. History is littered with examples of this, from religious wars to crusades, to the slave trade. All of these were perpetrated with the idea that the people subjected to these atrocities were lesser and that they were not the same (Joshi 2020).

The difference that is created between the “one” and the “other” is precisely what the KKK and QAnon base their white supremacist claims on. They see “their own” as under attack by the other. This is also the narrative that they spread to their followers. You would think that there is a difference in intensity between QAnon and the KKK when looking at the severity of their actions (lynching people is on another level from protesting against the government). However, it seems like more of a difference in conviction. The KKK has been very much convinced of their own narrative for the last sixty years, so they have been fully submersed in this way of thinking for decades. QAnon, with its constant adding of CTs and relatively short life, are not as settled yet.

Differences

Unlike their similar use of the other, the KKK and QAnon are two completely different entities. QAnon, in essence, is a CT, which according to philosopher David Coady,

entails that it is not the story acknowledged by scholars, the media, the government, etcetera at that time and place (Coady 2019, 9). The Ku Klux Klan is a different case. The KKK is a new religious/ideologic movement. This means that they are an organised collective that works in line with the beliefs of their faith/ideology. The KKK, however, can also very much be described as a terrorist organisation as they have committed a lot of hate crimes in the name of their ideology through the centuries. “Lynchings, shooting and whippings were the methods employed by the Klan. Blacks, Jews, Catholics, Mexicans and various immigrants were usually the victims” (Bond 2011, 20).

Their difference in a label so far does not mean that both parties do not overlap in some way. The KKK also uses CTs in order to strengthen the conviction of their cause. Think of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* being used. Klan members believe in theories that promote the supremacy of white people over other communities and skin colours. QAnon may be a CT, or rather an umbrella CT¹. However, that does not mean that there is entirely no organisation in their supporters. Think of how the storming of the Capitol had to be planned in some way. Enough people had to have that idea and needed to be in that location in order to make it work.

Because QAnon and the KKK are different entities, one of the most significant differences appears to be the way of organisation: the KKK is an organised entity where there is a social hierarchy and there are leaders (Smeekes 2020). QAnon, on the other hand, has one or multiple anonymous leaders who share encrypted information (Garry et al. 2021, 8) with their trusted following, who in turn share it in public. This means that there is some organisation of information. However, aside from shared information, the QAnon supporters are not a collective entity. Instead, they are individuals who share a collective idea (Bleakley 2021). Nonetheless, they are beginning to get more organised. An example of this is the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6th this year.

Conclusion

To concisely answer the question of whether or not QAnon and the KKK are different enough to receive a different label in society: yes, they are. The Ku Klux Klan is over a hundred years old and works in ways that are not comparable to QAnon directly. There are organisational differences between the two as QAnon is an umbrella CT, one that contains multiple CTs. The KKK is a terrorist group that also believes in CTs. The difference lies mainly in the goal of the organisation. The KKK uses their convictions to justify violence against minorities. QAnon, on the other hand, wants to inform people about what they think is going on even though it is based on debunked information.

1 QAnon is a umbrella CT as the theory they believe in is made up out of multiple different CTs.

The similarities between both of them stem from the use of the same sources, rhetorical devices and extremist behaviour in the form of terrorist attacks. Most of their supporters are from the evangelical Protestant community, which is the largest community in the US. So it could be that there is causation. However, I do not have the time or resources to research that.

QAnon and the KKK differ too much on an organisational level to be named under the same term of CT or new religious movement. Their motivations also are too separate for me to call them the same. I do want to clearly state that this does not mean that one is worse than the other, as they both have a bad influence on the world, spreading division and hate.

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Is Conspiracy Against Women in the Workplace Irrational?

A Review of Current Workplace From the Perspective
of Feminism and Irrationality

Yeha Jung

A conspiracy may seem exciting or fun to talk about, such as the flat Earth theory, the alien conspiracy, and many more sound interesting. However, is it always fun? Even if there are conspiracies targeting half of the population in the world? I am saying that it is sexism. Sexism is gender discrimination, especially against women. And sometimes, women do not get protected by the law. This paper will focus on gender discrimination, especially in the workplace. That is because earning bread and butter is crucial to living. The only way to earn bread and butter is to work. Working is essential to not only the people but also the nations. Labour makes the country run. In so many ways, working is vital to all. Even almost every country has labour laws for just rights for the workers and the employers. However, there are so many women getting discriminated against in many workplaces. In various cases, there are legal restrictions on women from economic activities. Christine Lagarde sees this issue and says, “In too many countries, too many legal restrictions conspire against women to be economically active” (*The Guardian* 2015). So, this paper aims to address sexism in the workplace and raise awareness of it to make the world a more equal and better place.

Sexism in workplaces is a conspiracy. Why? At the fundamental level, I believe this idea is based on the thought of Simone De Beauvoir that women are seen as subordinate to men and weak, inferior, and incomplete even though women are as strong as men, equal to men, and complete as men (De Beauvoir 1953, 16). According to the book, *The Second Sex* by De Beauvoir, men suppress women by labelling women as an object, the other, inessential, while men are subjects, superior, complete, and absolute (De Beauvoir 1953, 16). I will address further why sexism in workplaces is a conspiracy below, starting with a sneak peek in the introduction. Lagarde, from whom I actually got the inspiration for this paper, says that “in too many countries, too many legal restrictions conspire against women to be economically active” (Lagarde 2015). To be more specific, the data of IMF Blog tells that there is a strong relationship between legal restrictions and the female labour participation rate. It was announced that when 50 per cent of the countries reflected equity in law, the female work participation rates increased (Lagarde 2015). Furthermore, when looking into the achievements of the female, there was no difference in the working performance depending on gender. According to Ogunleye and Osekita, gender does not have a significant effect on work performance. This means that women do not lack the capability, but there is a lack of equity (Ogunleye and Osekita 2016, 244). Therefore, I see this is because there is a conspiracy against women working in the workplace.

As the aim of this paper, raising awareness of sexism in workplaces, I am going to approach discrimination against women in workplaces as a conspiracy against women from the perspective of its irrationality. That is because “rationality” is something

socially acceptable, which makes sense to the general population. And irrationality does not. By arguing the irrationality of a conspiracy against women in workplaces, I believe I can accomplish gaining sympathy from the majority that conspiring and discriminating against women without valid reasons is irrational and succeed in raising awareness.

This paper will consist of six parts. First of all, after the introduction, I will explain what a conspiracy is. Secondly, I will provide examples of conspiracy against women in their workplaces. And then, I will argue why sexism is a conspiracy against women. Next, the reasons why conspiracy against women is irrational. Lastly, the conclusion will end this paper.

What is a Conspiracy?

Before starting, I will first define the term “conspiracy”. What is a conspiracy? Is it a scary novel? Or is it just something undiscovered? According to Douglas et al, “a conspiracy” is “a secret plot by two or more powerful actors” (Douglas et al. 2019, 4). However, in this paper, I will use the Cambridge Dictionary. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a conspiracy is “the activity of secretly planning with other people to do something bad or illegal” (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). In this paper, the expression “secretly planning” is important, because a conspiracy is not any well-perceived activity for the general population. It means that it has to remain as an assumption, not an assertion. Otherwise, it becomes some form of knowledge, not a conspiracy. The important part of this paper is that sexism in the workplace remains a conspiracy, yet to be well-known knowledge. However, there are conspiracies that many people know. Yet, they started with “secret planning.” Then, they developed into something famous. So, in this paper’s case, I am writing about something yet to be popular but definitely existing.

A Conspiracy Against Women in The Workplace

This paper was inspired by one article in *The Guardian*. The first female head of IMF (International Monetary Fund), Christine Lagarde, says, “[i]n too many countries, too many legal restrictions conspire against women to be economically active” (*The Guardian* 2015). *The Guardian* casts doubt on what Lagarde said by putting quotation marks on “conspire”, but I would argue that there might be a conspiracy against women reflecting the exclusion of women from economic activity in so many workplaces. Also, I do not think that Lagarde’s argument that so many women are facing legal restrictions based on their gender is fiction. *The Guardian* article cites Lagarde’s study of IMF, “fund staff found that despite progress on gender equity, almost 90 percent of countries still have at least one legal restriction based on gender, and 28 countries have ten or more such laws” (*The Guardian* 2015). Additionally, when 50 per cent of the countries reflected gender equity in their law, the female labour participation rate increased by five percentage points at the smallest.

The data I found about female discrimination in the workplace consolidates my argument that there might be a conspiracy against women. According to the newest data from the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), the gender wage gap exists (OECD 2021). The OECD reveals that women get paid 12 per cent less than men in the OECD total. More surprisingly, out of thirty-eight OECD member countries, in South Korea, which has the highest gender wage gap, women get paid 31 per cent less than men (OECD 2021). This means that South Korean women are working two hours and forty minutes for free every day. That is unarguably a big difference. Another example shows that men in all the thirty-eight OECD member countries are hired more than women in the OECD member states. None of those countries has an equal employment rate. Turkey has the highest gender employment rate gap, which is 38 per cent, 70.9 per cent of Turkish men are hired, but for women, only 32.9 per cent of Turkish women got employed (OECD 2021).

This means that South Korean women are working two hours and forty minutes for free every day.

I am going to examine further how the gender employment gap connects to a conspiracy against women. As I revealed above, women are less employed and paid than men. Is this a matter of women's capability? I do not think so. Neither do Ogunleye and Osekita (2016, 244). According to Ogunleye and Osekita (2016, 244), "no significant effect of sex on work performance was reported in this study". This means that men and women are equally capable; accordingly, I argue that there must be a conspiracy that restricts women from being economically active.

Why is Sexism in the Workplace a Conspiracy Against Women?

Firstly, discrimination is not always a conspiracy. However, in some cases, there are possibilities of a conspiracy of sexism in the workplace. I believe the conspiracy against women comes from the thoughts that women are inferior to men. As I cited De Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex* in the introduction, men suppress women by labelling women as an object, the other, inessential, but men as a subject, superior, complete, and absolute (De Beauvoir 1953, 16). I think her argument reveals the ideological discrimination against women. This is a feminist perspective that can support my argument that women are being treated unfairly and unequally in a sexist way, which originated from a conspiracy against women. And I think her observation is a fundamental approach that lets us think about how to treat women rationally.

Legal rights are undeniably important in the workplace. Without the guarantee of legal rights in the workplace, unemployment could be caused. Usually, legal decision makings are conducted by the government. At the same time, the government can make conspiratorial decisions, but it is not easy to conclude that they are conspiratorial because conspiracy is "a secret plot." When everyone knows that a policy or

something is meant to harm someone, which cannot immediately become a conspiracy because it is no longer “a secret plot.” However, after some time, it may turn out to be a conspiracy in public. Pigden gives an example of induction of unemployment due to conspiracies in his article. According to Pigden, the New Zealand government induced a high level of unemployment due partly to a conspiracy. Roger Douglas (Labour Party) and Ruth Richardson (National Party) introduced the policies, and those were based on conspiratorial ideas since they were never introduced to the people but were established within each political party by an ideological faction that could take over caucus and reject the manifesto. And this case fits into the premises that Pigden proposed in order to invite conspiracy-originated unemployment:

- (1) that government action can induce unemployment (surely an uncontroversial claim)
 - (2) that government decisions are sometimes due to conspiracy.
- (Pigden 1995, 23-24)

As Pigden says, the government can make conspiratorial policies, and those can hugely affect the general population and the nation (Pigden 1995, 23-24). As I mentioned in the case of Turkey above, conspiracies in the labour market can be created by the government and can possibly have a great impact on the employment rate.

I will provide different and more recent examples that Lagarde writes in IMF Blog; gender-based restrictions are still prevailing significantly in spite of some progress in gender equality (Lagarde 2015). Lagarde says that almost 90 per cent of countries have at least one important gender-based legal restriction (Lagarde 2015). She cites World Bank’s data that reveals the relations between legal restrictions and the female workforce. IMF conducted a study on what happens when the countries reflect equity in the law. About 50 per cent of the countries had a five percentage

*I believe this case reveals
that there has been
a conspiracy against
women in the workplace.*

point increase in female labour participation when they legally considered equity in their law in the following five years. To be more specific, in Peru, in 1993, when the new constitution accorded equality among men and women by the law and eradicated gender discrimination in workplaces, women’s labour force participation

rate increased by 15 per cent. There could have been other reasons, but Lagarde adds that legal rights are essential. What can be observed here is that there have been legal restrictions in the workplace against women, which actually prohibited women from working. I believe this case reveals that there has been a conspiracy against women in the workplace. Furthermore, a feminist philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, writes in her article “Women’s Capabilities and Social Justice”, “many existing value systems

are themselves highly paternalistic, particularly toward women. They treat them as unequal under the law, as lacking full civil capacity, and as not having the property rights, associative liberties, and employment rights of males” (Nussbaum 2000, 226).

Why is Sexism and Conspiring Against Women Irrational?

In consideration of the agreement that sexism might be a conspiracy against women, I would like to continue to argue that sexism, a conspiracy against women, is irrational. Many people would agree that sexism is one of the things that should be tackled. To convince or argue that gender discrimination should be gone, logic has to be used. In other words, we must think rationally. I am using rationality to convince people that sexism has to disappear. However, some people might also think that not all forms of discrimination are irrational. People might have different perspectives depending on their cultural backgrounds. However, I consider it irrational when people discriminate against other people by their inherent features, such as skin colour, race, or sex, and matters deeply related to their survival. I believe that sexism in the workplace is irrational because it is wrong to discriminate against someone for something they were initially born with and have little to no influence on. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “direct discrimination is wrong because it is an arbitrary or irrational way to treat persons. In other words, direct discrimination imposes a disadvantage on a person for a reason that is not a good one, viz., that the person is a member of a certain salient social group” (Altman 2020). To clarify what “direct discrimination” is, according to ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service), direct discrimination is “when someone is treated unfairly because of a protected characteristic, such as sex or race” (ACAS n.d.). And then ACAS gives an example of sexism by saying that “for example, someone is not offered a promotion because they’re a woman and the job goes to a less qualified man” (ACAS n.d.). And that is what is exactly happening in the labour market. Additionally, not many people can justify sexism but express objections like Cotter. In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Cotter says that direct discrimination looks upon people unequally “without rational justification” (Altman 2020). Therefore, I believe sexism is irrational and should be tackled.

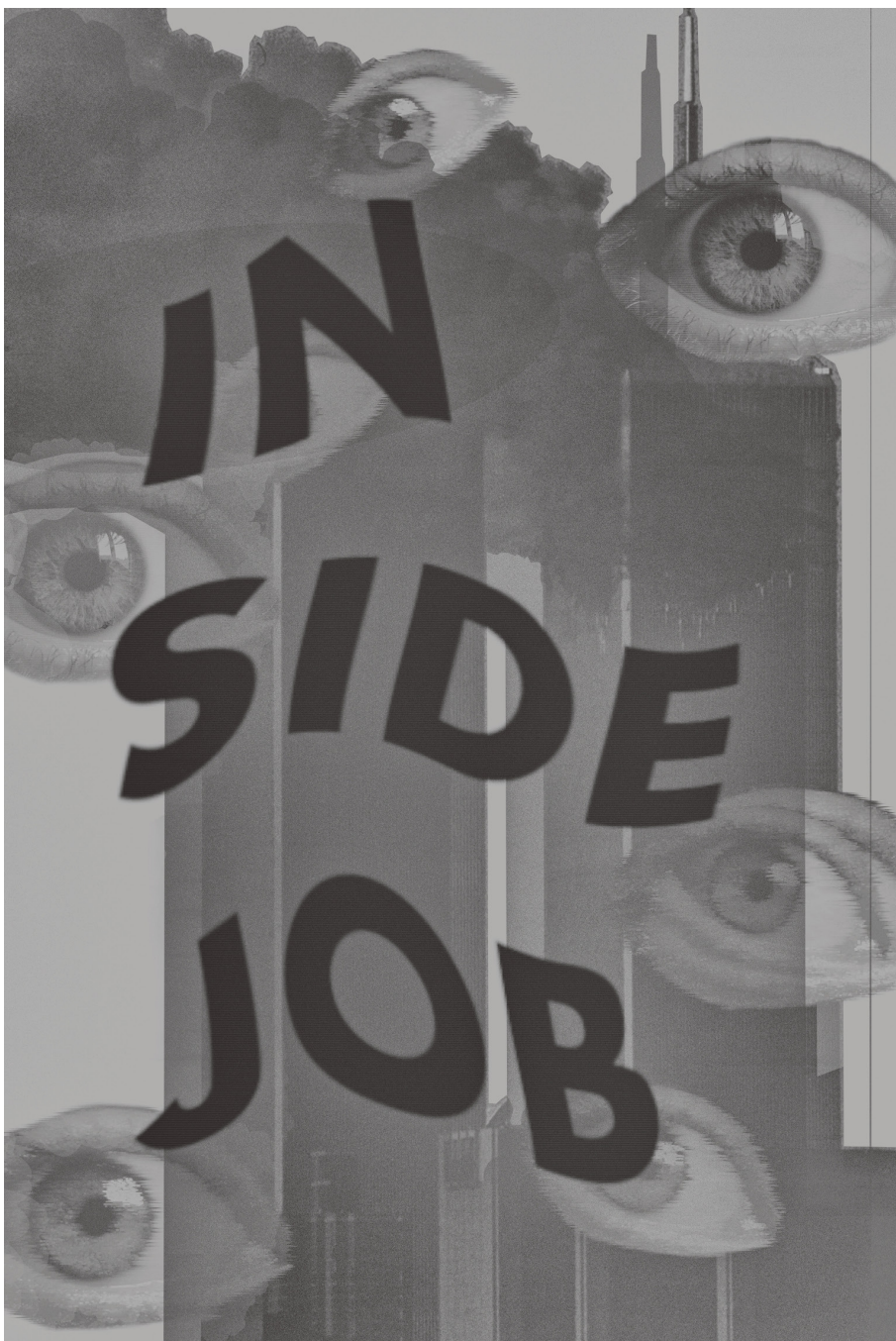
Conclusion

A conspiracy is not necessarily irrational nor must be tackled. However, it is clarified that there might be a conspiracy against women in the workplace, and it has a form of sexism. Concludingly, I can only say there might be a conspiracy against women in the workplace because a conspiracy is “secret planning.” Additionally, if people “know” that there is a force trying to harm women, then it is no longer a conspiracy. Therefore, the conspiracy has to remain an assumption. Even though I cannot conclude that there “is” a conspiracy against women, I believe this paper is still meaningful because starting to argue about the gender discrimination issues as a conspiracy may bring a

positive change to society. Since sex is an inherent characteristic of people and discriminating based upon such features is highly disrespectful. Especially discrimination in the workplace is almost equivalent to putting someone in danger economically, which is a threat to someone's survival. Therefore, legal protection is necessary. Legal policies are so powerful that they may cause unemployment, as I revealed above. So, if the policymakers do not consider equity, the minorities may have crucial harm. As I mentioned above, there has been no consideration of minorities legally in society. Therefore many women were refrained from being economically active. And there was no significantly rational reason for women to be restrained from working. Direct discrimination, sexual or racial discrimination, is wrong and irrational, as I proved above. Thus, I strongly agree with the feminist view that this irrational discrimination, that is, sexism, must be tackled.

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Is the Allure of Conspiracy Theories Based on Their Supposed Irrationality?

Kirsty Crook

Introduction

Nowadays, you hear about CTs a lot: Edward Snowden, 9/11, and flat earth. What do these all have in common? They pique your interest before totally capturing it like a dive down a rabbit hole. But just how CTs grab your interest and hold it with such a vice is what I will be examining in this essay. I have a theory that it is the supposed irrationality that is attached to the term that is the root cause of the interest, the beginning of the crumb trail – so to say, that leads you down the rabbit hole.

First of all, I will expand on the definition of CT I am using in this essay. In my definition, a CT will be most easily understood in two parts, each with a title question, what is a conspiracy, and what is a theory.

What is a Conspiracy?

Starting with the former, a conspiracy can be defined in a few ways, but I will be using the definition wherein a conspiracy is a covert plan between two or more individuals to enact a plan that is against the law or in bad moral standing in some way, speaking in terms of a general moral standard. For example, if two people had planned to steal their colleagues' lunch from the fridge at work, that could be considered a conspiracy. Even as small as it may seem, however, this definition can scale well to suit larger-scale CTs, such as in the case of the conspiracy that Edward Snowden revealed in 2013. Wherein the national security agency (NSA) conspired within itself to spy on its citizens and infringe on their right to privacy under more than one set of laws. In definition, a conspiracy. Shown on a larger scale than the previous example.

What is a Theory?

And a theory is a strongly held belief based on supposed facts; for example, some believe that the dinosaur skeletons we have are not representative of what dinosaurs were actually like since many dates back to the time in which they were found - a time in which real archaeological evidence would be lacking. This would make the idea that the dinosaur skeletons we know today are simply an amalgamation of pieces. But this is just one example of a theory based on some people's belief that the palaeontologists of the past lacked knowledge.

The Definition of a Conspiracy Theory

To bring these two definitions together, we can define a CT; therefore, a CT is a firmly held belief based on supposed facts that two or more people have (or had) a secret plan that is in some way devious or morally devoid in nature. It would be simpler to give an example, but for this essay, I felt it best to elaborate completely on what my definition

is. As an example to put this definition into practice, we can use the Edward Snowden case again; he had a strongly held belief based on facts he acquired working within the US government that the NSA was covertly spying on and gathering information on US citizens unlawfully. And all of this stems simply from the connotations and uses of the term CT. From what a person believes when they hear a term. In this case, CT has been used and butchered by the media nowadays to mean any new rumour or abnormal idea. This by no means dismisses all that the media will call a CT, but it is undeniable that this type of usage has had an effect on the general consensus of what a CT is and how it is perceived. In this case, it is irrational.

This leads us back to my research question, and the topic at hand – just what makes these CTs so alluring, and is it the supposed irrationality surrounding them and the term as a whole?

What is Supposed Irrationality?

Supposed irrationality is a concept that can be useful in explaining the current interest in CTs. Firstly, it would be useful to define each half of the term before bringing them together and applying them to the topic at hand. Irrationality can be simply defined as a lack of rationality or logic in a given thought or action or any manner of other things. And to suppose something is to believe or assume something without proof or certain knowledge. Hence supposed irrationality would be bringing these two definitions together, meaning supposed irrationality is the belief or thought that something such as a CT – as we are discussing in this case – is irrational from the get-go without a thought for the reasoning behind it or evidence that supporters may present.

How Supposed Irrationality Makes Conspiracy Theories Interesting

So how could this help to explain why CTs are just so interesting nowadays? When you think of the term CT before even hearing of a theory in itself, you are led to

*Of course, the world is not a disc on
pillars in space! It is simply irrational!*

the idea that it is irrational. I argue that just the use of the term conspiracy in the media has led to the rise in just how

many people presuppose that CTs are irrational. After all, most would hear that the world is flat and let the information pass them by. Of course, the world is not a disc on pillars in space! It is simply irrational!

Though perhaps another conspiracy would not be considered so irrational at first glance. For example, another theory, such as Edward Snowden's theory about the NSA spying on US citizens, the information provided by Snowden and the reaction of the agency itself made it seem less irrational. If an agency is actively hunting and threatening someone based on them discussing the agency's misdoings - it perhaps makes the CT seem less irrational.

This concept could lead to the conclusion that this supposed irrationality leads to the interest in CTs since people feel like they are set apart from everyone else. That they are special, that they who believe in CTs and have specialist knowledge of CTs are one of the few rational people who can see through the supposed irrationality. That they are one of the select few, who can lift the epistemological veil and find the truth. It has been seen that we in society call those who are the first to believe in or speak out on a CT crazy or paranoid when sometimes they are proved to be true, such as in the case of Edward Snowden. Snowden, who at first was brushed off as paranoid for his claims that the NSA in the USA was actively surveilling their population - was proved correct in time, so correct in fact - that he is still living in Russia after seeking asylum there in 2013. Therefore, we can make the assumption that the interest, in this case, lies in the supposed irrationality at first glance. The danger in being the irrational one who believes that the USA spies on its citizens, the danger of being the one who is in on the secret. That is what is interesting about CTs - they are supposed to be irrational but can, in fact, be the reality. The supposed irrationality of CTs, therefore, allows people to feel as if they are unique in being able to see through the irrationality and become one of those who are educated - one of the special people.

In a General Post-Modern View

It can also be argued that people may feel reality is too pressing or too harsh; these theories can provide an escape. CTs, supposedly being irrational, can thereby provide an escape from the rigorous rationality of day-to-day life demands. Yes, you may have to go to work every day and have an hour-long commute. But why does that matter when the government is secretly controlled by lizard people? That you are simply contributing to the scaly agenda. It is a funny concept, is it not? The idea that Joe Biden or Queen Elizabeth herself could be a lizard parading around in human skin. The exploration of this idea is an escape. It is thought to be irrational that our leaders could have scales under their skin; the pressures of life seem lesser in comparison to the threat that would come from the secret lizard person agenda. This assumed irrationality is a form of escapism. A quote by Dan Ariely is useful here to support my point: "We all want explanations for why we behave as we do and for the ways the world around us functions. Even when our feeble explanations have little to do with reality. We're storytelling creatures by nature, and we tell ourselves story after story until we come up with an explanation that we like and that sounds reasonable enough to believe" (Ariely 2012). Here Ariely is stating that one thing that people tend to sorely need in this complex post-modern world - a story to tell, a reason why they have to spend all day in a little cubicle, working for a man who works half as much as you do for double the pay. Something to allow you to completely reject rationality and embrace the irrational - if only for your hour-long commute. To allow you to cope just long enough to get to tomorrow's commute.

However, this does not apply to more serious or complex CTs. The idea that there are lizard people can be funny, but the idea that the government is spying on you or that former elected officials are conspiring to groom and assault children (per pizzagate) is not so funny. These types of theories push reality or harsher ideas in people's faces. That there are, in fact, corrupt officials even if they are not the ones who partook in conspiracies such as pizzagate. Or that your privacy is, in fact, being infringed for purposes only known to those who harvest our data. These types of theories bring up more questions... Why does the NSA need the data of its citizens? Is it viewing those it claims to protect as a threat? And such questions are no escape, not on your commute or in your job. They only make you scared. Make you paranoid. Perhaps even prone to act more irrationally.

Irrational Theorisers

On the one hand, James S. Hans states in his book *Socrates and the Irrational* that “[a]n extremely rational person approaches another border of inhumanity in his or her extreme machine-like determination to banish anything from life that does not parse in logical ways” (Hans 2006). This may lead to the conclusion that the interest in the irrationality of CT is, in fact, based on the supposed irrationality of those who follow them and who believe such theories. After all, it is often the followers that give life to

In conclusion, I would argue that there is an extremely strong case for the supposed irrationality of CTs, which is the reason why they are so interesting.

a movement, give it a voice and an identity, and I would argue that this is no different. I would argue that those who follow a CT become part of its identity. Take, for example, flat earthers. We all know of them, how they believe the world is flat (as is evident in the name of the group) and that

any attempt to convince them that the earth is – in fact, a globe – is simply irrelevant. Flat earthers have been characterised as unbelieving of any perspective other than their own or any observation they have not personally made, whether or not it has any empirical evidence to back it up.

Though this is linked to the irrationality of the theory, in part, it takes on a decidedly more sociological to psychological viewpoint. Perhaps it is even arguable that we see interest in the person's own view of rationality and how theories such as the Denver airport theory or the lizard people theory may seem rational and seem like a perfectly normal explanation. Perhaps as normal even as explaining to a child that milk comes from a cow or that clouds are the reason that rain falls from the sky.

However, I would argue that instead, people would take a theory at first glance and consider it first before considering those who may follow it. When you hear that the earth is flat, for example, your first thought is often not “Oh, perhaps I should take

a look at who would ever believe this” your first thought is often simply, “Why would anyone think that?” And leading into just how they could reason as such. Therefore, focusing on the irrationality of a CT at first thought rather than the supposed irrationality of those who believe in them. Those who theorised that you might just be able to fall off the edge of the world if you sail far enough. It is the theory that strikes you first rather than the believers.

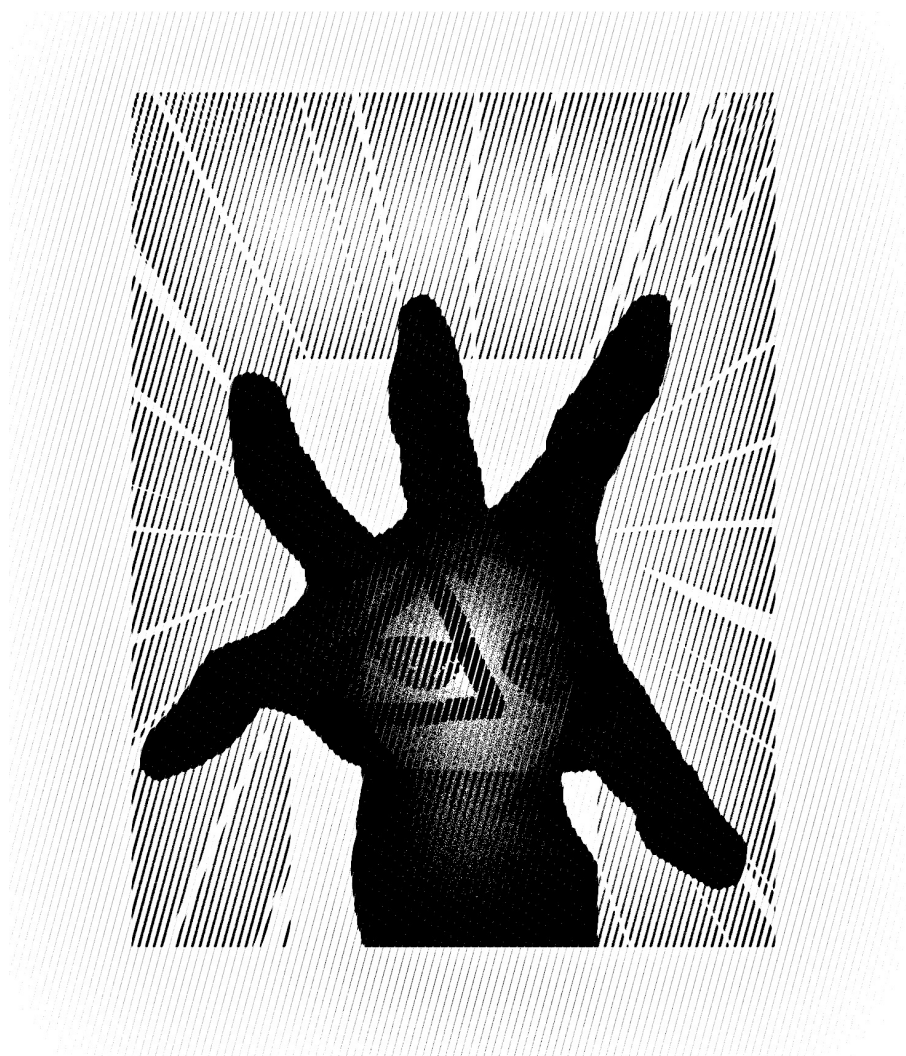
Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue that there is an extremely strong case for the supposed irrationality of CTs, which is the reason why they are so interesting. That the idea of supposed irrationality comes with the connotations of the term conspiracy. Even if some may argue that it is the irrationality of the followers of a theory, we can conclude that irrationality is the key point here. That it is irrationality in almost any case that makes a CT interesting.

The true answer is not so simple as saying that one of the arguments presented today is the strongest but that it is a combination of them all, that the supposed irrationality can be used as an escape from the rigorous rationality as can be posed in a general postmodern philosophical view when for others it can be the irrational theorists and their beliefs. When taken from any other point of view, the allure of CTs can be based on a variety of other factors, but from a philosophical point of view, I conclude that yes, it is the supposed irrationality of CTs that makes them alluring.

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Harmful Conspiracy Theories - A Small Price to Pay?

Laura Schranz

Introduction

Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 have surged quickly after the beginning of the pandemic. Their content is various, ranging from speculation about the origin of the virus, denial of its existence, and downplay of its dangers to the effectiveness of measures such as masks or, later, the vaccine. While these individual CTs are new, the act of conspiracy theorising has been around for much longer. In his book, *Social Justice in Practice* (2014), Finnish Philosopher Juha Räikkä evaluates the position of CTs and conspiracy theorising in modern society from different philosophical perspectives. After Brian Keeley, on whom Räikkä bases his notion of CTs, a CT is “[a] proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret” (Räikkä 2014, 77). The focus of this essay will lie on Räikkä’s chapter “On the Ethical Acceptability of Conspiracy Theories.” It is necessary to evaluate CTs in relation to the social dynamics of engaging with them since “[c]reating and disseminating conspiracy theories is a mental and social activity. Thus, it is natural to ask whether it is a fair and desirable activity. It is generally known that our attitudes toward conspiracy theories can have important consequences” (Räikkä 2014, 77). Räikkä separates the “social activity” of conspiracy theorising from individual CTs and argues that the benefits of conspiracy theorising outweigh the “moral cost” of individual CTs. Or, in the words of Steve Clarke (2002, 148), whom Räikkä frequently cites throughout the entire chapter, “giving a thousand conspiracy theories some consideration is a small price for us to pay to have one actual nefarious conspiracy [...] uncovered sooner rather than later.”

While the conception that conspiracy theorising as an activity is valuable for society is right, one should not conclude that the moral cost of individual CTs can be dismissed this easily. Arguing why this is the case will be the main aim of this paper. Räikkä follows the style of utilitarian equations in his ethical evaluation of societal benefit versus moral cost. I will explain the moral concepts of utilitarianism in more detail later. Furthermore, Räikkä’s evaluation fails to consider the real-life consequences such an attitude would have on the people affected by individual CTs. This is tightly intertwined with why his utilitarian approach is problematic. Hence, the research question criticising Räikkä’s evaluation is the following: “In what ways is Juha Räikkä’s utilitarian approach to CTs problematic under real-world conditions?” A pressing example of such problematic consequences can be found in the CT concerning the origin of COVID-19, known under the name “lab-leak theory”. This theory is especially relevant as it highlights a particular case in which a seemingly

science-based CT can have terrible consequences when hit with already existing dynamics within society, such as racism and xenophobia, posing a threat particularly to already discriminated groups.

This paper is enriching for our volume as it does not think of CTs in black and white terms such as “irrational” and, therefore, bad. Instead, I provide a more nuanced, detailed assessment of the potential dangers a CT entails.

Räikkä’s Argumentation

It has been argued by thinkers such as Steve Clarke or David Coady that “political conspiracy theorizing is a welcome phenomenon, as the information gathering activities of conspiracy theorists and investigative journalists force governments and government agencies to carefully check their decisions and practices” (Räikkä 2014, 78). Räikkä agrees with these conceptions of political conspiracy theorising, as he too argues in favour of the mentioned phenomenon. Conspiracy theorising as an activity has many valuable effects, such as that it helps to “maintain openness in society” (Räikkä 2014, 78). Those engaging in conspiracy theorising the conspiracy theorists, “[challenge] us to improve our social explanations”, and sometimes they

Räikkä continues to underline his argument with the following analogy: a comparison of conspiracy theorising with the “war on terrorism”.

even identify a “genuine conspiracy” that would have otherwise not been revealed (Räikkä 2014, 78). Critics of conspiracy theorising argue that political conspiracy theorising “tends to undermine trust in democratic political institutions and its implications may be morally questionable” (Räikkä 2014, 78).

Räikkä responds by stating that in an ethical evaluation, “conspiracy theorising as a cultural phenomenon should be distinguished from the ethical evaluation of particular conspiracy theories” (Räikkä 2014, 78). Furthermore, he states that political conspiracy theorising may be a valuable cultural phenomenon, even if many political CTs have moral costs. This separation of the activity, conspiracy theorising, and the outcome, individual CTs, is essential for Räikkä’s line of argumentation. It allows him to give conspiracy theorising as the process a certain value without having to deny the existence of potentially negative consequences. This implies that not the process is faulty, only the outcome, which in this case is the CT. He does acknowledge that individual CTs have high moral costs since they, e.g., place people in a false light in the public eye. However, these “false positives” are a “price we just have to pay in order to achieve valuable goals” (Räikkä 2014, 82).

Räikkä continues to underline his argument with the following analogy: a comparison of conspiracy theorising with the “war on terrorism”. An argument

commonly used in defence of said war is that it “is morally justified, as it serves extremely important goals such as democracy, justice, and freedom” (Räikkä 2014, 81). The reasoning Räikkä (2014, 81-82) provides goes as follows:

It is true that the individual actions in the war violate systematically human rights and limit basic rights of people all over the world. In target countries human sacrifices are common. The war harms many, especially women and children, in many areas. No doubt, these are moral costs of the war, but they are a small price to pay. Although some individual actions may be unnecessary and could be replaced by more humane actions, an effective warfare requires actions that are not morally acceptable if evaluated one by one. For instance, torture and intentional killing of non-combatants are generally morally impermissible, but they secure that the warfare is effective. Close down all these kinds of practices and you will lose the war – with terrible consequences.

There are a lot of questionable implications made here, but most importantly, individual pain and moral concerns are relativised by referring to the bigger picture and the overall surplus of benefit. This is precisely what a utilitarian would argue.

Utilitarianism

Räikkä weighs the benefits of conspiracy theorising up against the moral cost and danger of individual CTs to dismiss the latter as smaller. This is exactly the method used in utilitarianism, which is the philosophical framework for my critique. Räikkä himself does not call his equation utilitarian, but as follows, it certainly can be evaluated as one. Utilitarianism is a field in ethics that is concerned with morality, so, put simply, whether something such as an action is morally right or wrong (Driver 2014). According to John Stuart Mill, one of the most influential thinkers in this field of philosophy, morality is based on the so-called *Principle of Utility*, or in other words, the *Greatest Happiness Principle* (Mill 1998). After Mill (1998), something is morally right if it results in the biggest possible amount of happiness for the biggest possible amount of people. For determining whether my action is right, one can imagine a scale with the amount of happiness, joy, or general positive things created by said action on the one side and anything negative, any price I had to pay, on the other side. If the positive side weighs heavier, my action is morally right. Utilitarianism has received a lot of criticism as it tries to quantify feelings of pain, suffering, happiness, or joy, which are incredibly subjective to each person feeling them (Driver 2014).

In Räikkä’s utilitarian equation, the moral cost of individual CTs is recognised as bad but justified and labelled acceptable as it is outweighed by the all-over benefit of conspiracy theorising. The comparison to the war on terrorism emphasises this. As mentioned before, this dismissal of individual moral cost is very problematic, which becomes especially clear when looking at the consequences of such an attitude under real-world conditions. Before I provide an example of this, it is necessary to give some background information on the concept of *real-world conditions*.

Real-World Conditions

In the second semester of my Bachelor's in Philosophy, Politics and Society at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, I wrote a paper on John Rawls' work *A Theory of Justice* (1972). John Rawls was one of the most influential thinkers in liberal political philosophy as well as moral philosophy of the past century. He is known as an advocate of a socially just society in which free, equal citizens with equal rights and equality of opportunity act in favour of those in society with the least advantage. Rawls' "original position", central in his book *A Theory of Justice* (1972), is one of the most influential thought experiments in modern social contract theories. It describes a state in which equal citizens collectively form a society and decide on the principles of justice they will follow (Rawls 1972, 118-142).

Crucial in the "original position" is that the decisions are made under what Rawls refers to as the "veil of ignorance" (Rawls 1972), meaning that citizens do not know their individual traits, roles, or positions in said society. Their "public reason" guides them towards standards and laws acceptable by all, in any position (Rawls 1972, 136-142).

I will not go into further detail on this theoretical framework. For this essay, what matters is that people would intuitively decide on principles of justice that would still benefit those who are the least fortunate. In my paper on John Rawls, I have argued that there is a mismatch between his philosophical framework and its applicability in the real world under *real-world conditions*. This applies in Räikkä's case, too, since his thoughts may work in theory but would have gruesome consequences under *real-world conditions*, as the example of the lab-leak CT and its horrific consequences shows.

The Lab-Leak Theory

CTs about COVID-19 have surged quickly after the beginning of the pandemic, one being the so-called lab-leak theory.

According to a report on the origin of SARS-CoV-2 (the virological term used for COVID-19) published by the World Health Organisation WHO in March 2020,

It is important to note that the lab-leak theory is not just some groundless CT, but was investigated and taken seriously by scientists and politicians on an international level.

"all available evidence suggests that SARS-CoV-2 has a natural animal origin and is not a manipulated or constructed virus. SARS CoV-2 virus most probably has its ecological reservoir in bats" (WHO 2020). This zoonotic origin of COVID-19 is still the official story. The term zoonotic refers to a human contracting a new virus from an animal, either through contact or consump-

tion. In the case of COVID-19, all the first registered cases "had a direct link to the

Huanan Wholesale Seafood Market in Wuhan City, where seafood, wild, and farmed animal species were sold. Many of the initial patients were either stall owners, market employees, or regular visitors to this market” (WHO 2020).

This official story has raised doubt, leading to the rise of various CTs about the “true” origin of the virus. One of them is the so-called lab-leak theory, which suggests exactly what its name implies: that COVID-19 leaked from a lab. More precisely, the virus is said to have escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the only security level IV lab experimenting with SARS viruses in the area where the first cases emerged (Siegel 2021). Whether this leak was an accident or done on purpose divides this theory into branches. It is important to note that the lab-leak theory is not just some groundless CT, but was investigated and taken seriously by scientists and politicians on an international level. The WHO commissioned a study on the origins of the virus in January 2021 by a team of ten international scientists. These investigations have, however, not proven the theory right, and there is no publicly available scientific evidence supporting its claims (Siegel 2021).

Even though said investigations only further underlined what the WHO had already stated in their report of March 2020, the doubt the lab-leak theory planted fell on fruitful political grounds, especially where the relationship with the Chinese government was already damaged. A pressing example can be seen in the development of US-Chinese relations and former US President Donald Trump’s behaviour around this.

The ongoing trade war between the US and China, which especially escalated throughout 2019, had already taken its toll on the diplomatic relations between both countries. After the Trump administration decided to increase taxes “from 10 to 25 per cent on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods”, China responded, “by announcing plans to increase tariffs on \$60 billion worth of American goods” (Council on Foreign Relations 2021). Conflict around the Chinese technology company HUAWEI potentially being used for espionage in the US, leading to the Trump administration banning “U.S. companies from using foreign-made telecommunications equipment that could threaten national security” in May 2019, only further added to the existing tension (Council on Foreign Relations 2021).

Consequences of the Lab Leak Theory

Though, in late 2019 it seemed like a settlement of the mainly finance-focused conflict was in sight, news about the surge of COVID-19 cases in Wuhan quickly led to new escalations (Council on Foreign Relations 2021). Both China and the US were quick to engage in what the American news agency CNN calls a “blame-game” (Cohen, Marquardt, and Atwood 2020). While the US blamed China for failing to warn other counties of the new virus in time and spreading misinformation about the true extent

of cases and danger around COVID-19, Chinese officials accused the US military of bringing the virus to China. What followed was an exchange of finger-pointing at one another, which Trump especially took out on his Twitter account (Griffiths 2020). His tone-deaf, offensive tweets quickly made headlines. Trump was quick to speak of COVID-19 as “the Chinese virus”, blaming China for the pandemic and fuelling racist hate towards anybody being perceived as East-Asian, Chinese in particular, leading to numerous hate crime incidents as well as a framing of COVID-19 as “made in China” (Benjamin 2021).

This use of slurs and libels around political CTs is a common phenomenon, as Räikkä (2014, 80) states: “[o]stensible ‘conspiracy theorizing’ is thought to provide an excuse to disseminate this kind of slander. In some cases, it is difficult to say whether the conspiracy theorist is serious or whether she theorises simply because of strategic reasons.” Even though a potential strategy behind Trump’s rhetoric is worth investigating, I instead want to lay focus on the consequences his tweets had *in real life*, as these are a direct example of the *moral cost of a CT*.

A study assessing the association of Trump’s racist tweets with anti-Asian harassment, commissioned by the American Journey of Public Health, found that “[w]hen comparing the week before March 16, 2020, to the week after, there was a significantly greater increase in anti-Asian hashtags associated with #chinesevirus compared with #covid19” (Hswen et al. 2020).

This was harshly criticised by the WHO since “[n]aming viruses after geographic locations or groups of people is inaccurate, inappropriate and could aid in the creation of negative connotations for Asian Americans, specifically those of Chinese

descent” which can then “lead to the profiling of individuals associated with the virus” (Somvichian-Clausen 2020, 4-5). With a case like COVID-19, “where everyone is scared of catching it, Asian Americans become the physical embodiment of disease” (Somvichian-Clausen 2020, 7). Even after Trump suddenly decided to stop referring to COVID-19 as the

The reason Räikkä’s utilitarian approach to CTs is problematic under real-world conditions lies in the impossibility of quantifying real-world experiences of pain and suffering.

Chinese Virus, he continued to heavily use “the words ‘us and them’ in a way that very clearly marks that Asian Americans are not ‘us’”, as Grace Kao, professor of sociology at Yale University points out (Somvichian-Clausen 2020, 6). Prejudice and racism against Asians are unfortunately not new phenomena. “[...] Stereotypes have been here for decades... They’re always kind of underneath the surface. But if there’s some precipitating event, then it can bring it all back out” (Stevens 2020, 2).

When a racist narrative that puts the blame for an existential threat like the COVID-19 virus on one specific group meets an already existing racist attitude

towards the said group, horrendous consequences are the result. In this particular case, we can see what effects a seemingly scientific theory like the lab-leak CT can have when it collides with societal dynamics and potential instrumentalisation by politicians like Trump. In an already tense situation as there was in the US due to the ongoing conflict with China and the existing racist prejudice towards Asians, a CT like the lab-leak theory acts as fuel on a glimmering fire. The ones who burn already have a disadvantaged standing in society, and their immense suffering is hard to grasp, let alone quantify.

Even though cases of Chinese Americans being victims of racist attacks made it into the headlines of papers or went viral on social media, a large number stayed unreported and out of the public eye (Yan, Chen, and Naresh 2020). Therefore, it is hard to sufficiently understand the extent of suffering in empirical terms.

Even if it were possible to somehow list every case of racist harassment or other violence during the pandemic, such a report could not provide the evidence needed. It would be impossible to dissect to what extent the reasons for these incidents lie in racism that existed before and how much of it can be blamed on the lab-leak CT emphasising or entirely causing these attitudes. These two potential reasons are tightly intertwined and amplify one another; therefore, they cannot be easily separated in an investigation looking for the cause of an incident. In addition, since the pandemic is not over yet, we do not know the full extent of hate crimes with a causal relation to the virus.

Apart from the difficulty of counting cases and linking them to the lab-leak CT, another problem we face is that suffering and pain cannot be quantified. This critique, which is one of the biggest objections to utilitarianism, effortlessly applies in the case of Rääkkä's equation. Emotions in their nature are subjective, and so are pain tolerances and individual experiences of racism. All of them are horrible, yes, but how would this be recorded in empirical terms? Pain or sadness cannot be measured, and furthermore, the intersection of past racist experiences and other factors such as one's mental health makes it impossible to isolate how much of the pain was caused by this one particular incident that can be linked to the lab-leak CT.

Conclusion

To conclude, grasping the full extent of suffering caused by the lab-leak CT is incredibly hard, let alone quantifying this in any way. Thinking back to the utilitarian equation Rääkkä makes, such a quantification, however, is necessary as his whole point is based on him labelling the moral cost, meaning the negative consequences of a CT, a "small price to pay" (Rääkkä 2014, 82). How can he dismiss something as small if it is impossible to quantify? After all, statements about size, which include the term "small price", refer to the results of quantifications. Not to mention the dangerous potential of accepting a minority's suffering as a small price to pay when it seems

small in relation to the “greater good”. In this case, the greater good is the benefit the rest of society can profit from, which in combination with the implied us versus them narrative, pushes already marginalised groups further to the edge.

The reason Räikkä’s utilitarian approach to CTs is problematic under real-world conditions lies in the impossibility of quantifying real-world experiences of pain and suffering. Räikkä too easily dismisses the moral cost of individual CTs as small, which implies a quantifiability that I argued to be impossible. Such a dismissive attitude further endangers already discriminated groups, as their pain could always be labelled small in comparison to the rest of society if one thinks in such utilitarian terms. Initially, Räikkä’s aim is to argue why conspiracy theorising can be seen as a valuable phenomenon. He favours the sceptical attitude towards governments’ social explanations promoted by conspiracy theorising. To give an outlook, Räikkä is not wrong in providing a more nuanced evaluation of conspiracy theorising that considers its potential benefits. However, he wasted an opportunity. Dismissing pain, especially that of a minority, this easily is not the only way to justify granting conspiracy theorising and hence CTs a necessary place in society. Instead, he could have highlighted the benefits while still acknowledging the potential dangers in a respectful way and asked the question of how we can safely engage with them. The example of Trump shows the impact of language as well as the importance of considering already existing dangerous phenomena in society that might be further amplified when mixed with a CT. Such an evaluation would have been a great opportunity to provide more nuance without disrespecting individual suffering as necessary for the greater good.

Harmful Conspiracy Theories – a Small Price to Pay?

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COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: Reasons for Emotions in Politics

Evi Bongers

Conspiracy theories range from seemingly innocent or entertaining, to concerning in their implication that critical scientific institutions and governments are deceiving people across the globe. Often, CTs rise during periods of rapid social change and crisis (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). It should come as no surprise, then, that a pandemic serves as the ideal breeding ground for conspiratorial beliefs to flourish. Late in 2019, Wuhan was struck with a series of cases of pneumonia with an unidentified cause. Early in 2020, what was now known as COVID-19 had spread quickly enough to have the entire world in its grip. As the infection rates rose rapidly, so did the number of unanswered questions. When the public turned to their governments, governments turned to scientists. The World Health Organisation (WHO), which functions as an authority on international health, plays a vital role in responding to the coronavirus outbreak by administering guidance to nations all around the globe (GCSE 2021). Its director, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, noticed that the spread of the virus was not the only issue that required global attention and sounded the alarm early in the pandemic: “we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic,” he declared at the Munich Security Congress in February 2020, “Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous” (WHO 2020). CTs form perhaps the most threatening variant of fake news. They undermine the validity of the information that could be crucial to controlling the virus and almost always imply a grand scheme of deceit involving governments or scientists. Although the group of active conspiracy theorists is relatively small, their impact is emphasised by the need for a broad public willingness to contribute to tackling the public health crisis. Evidence suggests that subscribing to CTs surrounding the virus undermines engagement in public health measurements and governmental policies (Earnshaw et al. 2020). In addition, the belief in many COVID-related CTs predicts reluctance to vaccination (Jennings et al. 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has underlined the possible dangers of conspiratorial discourse. Consequently, public and political frustration grows, and the question of how to address conspiracy beliefs has become of increasing importance.

At the beginning of the pandemic, “following the science” became the mantra of many political leaders. That principle has since been continuously referred to as the cornerstone of COVID-19 policies. Amy Barnes and Justin Parkhurst (2014), both professors in public health policy, observe a larger trend of global health policies being presented as the result of evidence-based logic. They question the dominant frame of policymaking as the product of evidence and value-free reason, which is essentially beyond politics.

The research question of this paper is “How does the political focus on reason affect the belief in conspiracy theories?” I argue that the frame of global health policy

as beyond politics, as described by Barnes and Parkhurst (2014), can be applied to COVID-19 policy as well, as there is a primary focus on reasoning from scientific evidence to solve political issues. However, there are reasons to question the validity of this approach. Although understanding the psychological grounds of CTs is vital to formulating a response, the separation of reason and emotion should not reinforce the view that emotion is necessarily antithetical to reason (Greenspan 2004). Thus, I argue that an effective political response to CTs necessarily entails a reformulation of the value admitted to emotions in politics.

To develop my argument, I will focus on the political theory of Chantal Mouffe. She argues that a consensus-based, post-political mindset cannot embrace the passions that facilitate collective identification and consequentially enable democracy

Conversely, empirical evidence suggests that the belief in CTs is often rooted in intuitive rather than analytic thinking processes.

to function. Similarly to Barnes and Parkhurst, Mouffe observes a more significant trend, which she ascribes to modern liberal democracy (2005). She warns of the political consequences of failing to provide the grounds for collective passions.

Drawing from her theory, I will argue that the belief in CTs can be seen as an example of the detrimental effects of devaluing emotions.

Emotion and Reason in COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

Formulating a Response to Conspiracy Theories

CTs usually take on seemingly scientific language to argue against the official theories put forward by governmental institutes and scientists (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2018). Conspiracy theorists often propose a range of elaborate arguments, but their line of reasoning is commonly perceived as flawed or based on flawed evidence (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2018) and therefore deemed irrational. The structure of arguments brought forward by conspiracy theorists seemingly indicates that the belief in CTs is based on analytic and deliberative thinking processes (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2018). Conversely, empirical evidence suggests that the belief in CTs is often rooted in intuitive rather than analytic thinking processes. Van Prooijen and Douglas (2018) conclude that - though the expression of CTs depends mainly on a vocabulary of reason - conspiracy beliefs are emotional and refer to this apparent discrepancy as at least partly “grounded in a paradox” (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2018, 901).

Rethinking Views on the Emotional and the Rational

The view of emotion and reason as (at least partly) paradoxical is not exclusive to psychological theorising but has a broader reach. As argued by philosopher Patricia Greenspan, who is known for her work on rationality, morality and emotion, “[emotional] states are commonly thought of as antithetical to reason” (2004, 206). The label

emotional is often used in contrast to the label *rational*, in which the former carries a rather negative connotation (Greenspan 2004). This attitude toward the relationship between reason and emotion can also be found in politics.

It is rare for politicians or political leaders to explicitly deny that emotions play a role in political discourse. Emotions are employed by politicians in their rhetoric, and sensationalised media headlines seem to overtake more factual accounts of political debates (Marcus 2002). The diagnosis of the lack of a role for emotions might seem counterintuitive. However, emotions are often framed as an unfortunately unavoidable part of politics. It is, as George Marcus, Professor in Anthropology, explains, “conventionally accepted that passion has more influence than reason [...] and that such is human nature” (2002, 4), but this conclusion often leads to the assertion that there is a need for corrective measures, for instance, greater reliance on experts. Or alternatively, a more extensive approach of public deliberation, in which the search for a consensus serves to moderate emotions (Marcus 2002). These approaches rely on the underlying belief that emotion stands in the way of reason, in which the latter is framed as the democratic ideal.

The political focus on rationality combined with the view that emotions are antithetical to reason facilitates the idea that emotions should be either suppressed by or eradicated from the debate. The claim that CTs are emotional must not lead to the conclusion that they are unworthy of political consideration. Marcus (2002) contends that a purely rational approach to political life increases cynicism towards political institutions and communities, possibly only further enhancing existing conspiracy beliefs.

Similarly to Marcus, renowned political theorist Chantal Mouffe challenges the dominant view of emotion in politics. Through her theory, I argue that – in light of the increased interest in combating the belief in CTs during COVID-19 – reformulating political views on emotion and reason in the current political climate might serve as a starting point for a political response to CTs. A normative rational view on politics that assumes emotions must be suppressed or eradicated, I argue, might have the opposite effect of reinforcing the belief in CTs.

Chantal Mouffe: Reasons for Embracing Emotions

Mouffe’s Political Theory

Mouffe is highly critical of politics that encompass only rational discourse as valuable in politics. To her, the exclusion of “passions”¹ from the domain of politics is not

1 Throughout her work, Mouffe uses the term “passion” to refer to affect. While I will use “passions” while elaborating on her theory, I have chosen to use the term emotion throughout this paper. “Passion” is often associated with a passivity and unruliness, while “emotion” is commonly preferred by most of those who believe that affect is not antithetical to reason but a productive force in political and social life (see Mihai 2014, 11).

only undesirable but detrimental (Mouffe 2000). Her argument starts with the assertion that democratic life presupposes a heterogeneous community and that conflict is an inevitable result of a “pluralism of values” (Mouffe 2005, 103) and the passionate attachment to those values. Essentially, democracy entails different conceptions of what is good and important, which cannot be overcome by appeals to reason. Although this conflict is initially one that can be described as antagonistic, she argues for a transformation to an agonistic approach, in which opposing parties are “no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an ‘adversary’, that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question” (Mouffe 2005, 102). Although agonistic relations still implicate frontiers between an “us” as the product of unification in similar passions and values and a contrasting outgroup ‘them’, such a relation does not include the notion that the latter must be eradicated.

Essentially, democracy entails different conceptions of what is good and important, which cannot be overcome by appeals to reason.

Notably, Mouffe contrasts her theory with theories that entail the possibility of a universal rational consensus (2005, 3). She criticises the belief that impartial procedures can function to reconcile conflicting values (Mouffe 2005). To envisage political questions as mere technical issues to be solved by experts is to ignore that these decisions require a choice between conflicting alternatives (Mouffe 2005). She argues that such a rationalist approach forecloses the acknowledgement of collective identities (Mouffe 2005, 10). Instead, Mouffe encourages reflection on the idea that passions are to be erased from or suppressed by the political debate. Passions form the basis of collective identification, which in turn serves as a political motivator vital to democracy.

It is not only unsatisfactory to eradicate or repress passions in favour of a rationalist, consensus-based approach; it is potentially dangerous (Mouffe 2000, 104). The failure to embrace passions - and therefore, the inability to ensure appropriate channels for collective identification - creates the risk of passions erupting publicly in destructive and “undemocratic ways” (Mouffe 2000, 104).

Applying Mouffe’s Political Theory to COVID-19

As one would expect, the rise of the COVID-19 crisis raised a myriad of questions about its infection rates and its consequences on public and individual health. These questions undeniably depend on science. Thus, scientists have since been inextricably connected to public policy surrounding the global health crisis. As mentioned before, “Following the science” has become the founding principle of pandemic-related policies globally. Political leaders frequently claim to rely on science as the guide to decision-making. Besides the WHO, many countries also employ national-level

science advisory organs, such as the Dutch Outbreak Management Team (OMT). “[I]t’s important that we continue to be guided by scientific knowledge and reliable facts,” (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken 2020; my translation) Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte² declared during a speech in which he announced the initial national approach to tackling the COVID-19 crisis. Rutte referred to the scientific expertise of OMT director Jaap Van Dissel and colleagues as the determining factors for the policy he announced (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken 2020).

In discussing the depoliticisation of global health policy, Barnes and Parkhurst investigate the dominant frame of policymaking as value-free and free from political judgments (2014). They argue that there is a key difference between valid measurements of outcomes and the valuation of said outcomes (Barnes & Parkhurst 2014). This is in line with Mouffe’s claim that policy always requires a choice between competing alternatives (2005). When Rutte spoke of following the compass of “scientific knowledge and reliable facts” (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken 2020) in March 2020, he set the tone of evidence-based policymaking during the global health crisis. The OMT serves as an essential advisory organ to the government. It includes virologists, epidemiologists, microbiologists, doctors and other medical specialists (RIVM 2020). Director Van Dissel occasionally takes the stage at press conferences to announce the necessity of new measures by explaining health risks. During the latest press conference as of writing this paper, Rutte announced a lockdown, after which he gave Van Dissel the stage. The latter continued to explain the consequences of a new virus variant on infection rates. “That is the reason”, Rutte declared (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken 2021; my translation). Rutte essentially outsources the decision of going into lockdown to the OMT. However, such a decision presupposes the idea that minimising health risks – which are not the same throughout the population but vary for different groups – is the most critical aspect of policies during COVID-19, without justification. Such decisions are normative and political. Scientific evidence and models of expectation are not a reason for political action in themselves. It is the value placed on the consequences of competing alternatives that form the basis of policies. Policymaking, therefore, cannot be fully admitted to science, though it can and should be informed by it.

That other consequences on, for instance, psychological and social health, economics, equality, freedom and autonomy are not explicitly and concretely mentioned does not mean that they are not considered and outweighed in value. COVID-19 policy has primarily prioritised public health, mainly for the sake of the immunocompromised and elderly. I do not wish to critique this choice on a fundamental level, nor do I claim that the Dutch government does not engage with experts from different fields of study. However, to facilitate collective identification within politics, citizens

2 For a clear, cohesive, and concise approach, I will continue to give examples of press conferences and policies presented by the Dutch government, particularly by prime minister Mark Rutte.

must feel that competing alternatives are recognised and not invalidated. In autumn 2021, a longitudinal study by the Dutch National Institute of Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) showed that less than 45 per cent of respondents believe that their government even considers varying interests in their policymaking, as opposed to 72.2 per cent in May 2021 (RIVM 2020). This decrease is especially worrying, as the same study shows that only 15.4 per cent feel that the consequences of COVID-19 measures are divided among the population fairly (RIVM 2021), down from 33.1 per cent in February 2021.

Mouffe argues that impartial procedures cannot provide answers to political questions (2005). Decision-making in terms of COVID-19 policies undeniably involves making choices between competing approaches. Valid evidence has a vital role in making predictions on the outcomes of the options, which must not be undervalued. However, the COVID-19 crisis has a multitude of consequences on myriad

aspects of life. These include its effects on not just physical health but on mental health, social health and the economy, among others. The balance of these effects cannot be encompassed by only the study of

Scientific evidence and models of expectation are not a reason for political action in themselves.

the virus and its impact on health. Following Mouffe's theory, disagreement is not an issue per se. Rather, it is an unavoidable result of a pluralism of values and the passionate attachment to those values. Diverging judgements must be recognised as legitimate. The frame of policy as evidence-based does not allow for an understanding of varying perceptions as inherent to democracy. The staggeringly low satisfaction regarding the division of consequences of COVID-19 policy points to the fact that there is a political judgement to be made. It is problematic – but not surprising – that the number of citizens who feel that this is not recognised is increasing.

The evidence-based approach to health policy facilitates the exclusion of opposing opinions. Disagreement cannot be recognised as different interpretations that are inherent to democratic politics. Instead, opposing opinions are viewed as a matter of right versus wrong. This does not merely happen implicitly through the presentation of policy as a direct result of reasoning from scientific models and evidence. In a debate about the curfew implemented in the Netherlands, Rutte accused an opponent that disagreed of “standing on the side of the wappies”³ (Telegraaf 2021), by which he implied that diverging opinions on this measure must be the result of irrational thinking. He argued that there was enough evidence to support the effect of a curfew on the spread of the virus. However, to be against the curfew does not necessarily mean to deny the value or validity of evidence. It can be a matter of different values.

3 “Wappies” is a provocative term used to describe conspiracy theorists.

An approach to politics and policy that fails to acknowledge this cannot account for the recognition of differences that cannot be overcome and therefore cannot foster the appropriate channels for collective identification.

Applying Mouffe's Political Theory to COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

Mouffe argues that the failure to provide appropriate channels for collective identification within politics leads to other, often dangerous manners of collective identification. Engaging with CTs can provide identification with the label of "conspiracy theorist" itself. This proceeds to form the basis of an "us" versus "them" distinction, in which the collective identity of "conspiracy theorists" stands against, for instance, the government. This presents an issue to democratic politics, as to label something a conspiracy is to imply malicious intent of the conspiring party. Inarguably, this is an antagonistic relationship: a relationship of enemies (Mouffe 2005).

The belief in CTs interferes with the motivation to engage in democratic practises (Imhoff and Lamberty 2020) and instead works in destabilising or even vicious ways. Research suggests that protests that have been called for in chat groups that share a lot of CTs also escalate relatively frequently (Bakker et al. 2021). The Netherlands has been witness to the violent ways in which CTs may erupt. Like many others in Europe, the country has been tormented by fires in 5G phone masts (OMT 2021). A CT that pointed to the new masts as the cause of COVID-19 formed the motivation for the arson.

The assertion that CTs are emotional (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2018) is broadly accepted. However, it is primarily applied on an individual level, in which traits like partisanship and cynicism are linked to conspiracy beliefs (Einstein and Glick 2013). Rutte has spoken out against "riots" that alluded to CTs as the motive. He claimed that he was not interested in (sociological accounts of) their motivations; the protesters were simply displaying criminal behaviour that should not be excused (Fortuin 2021). Although there is truth to the latter part of his statement, a broader understanding of the mechanisms that possibly increase the chance of conspiratorial beliefs is beneficial. Research by Einstein and Glick (2013) suggests that macro-level variables similarly influence belief in CTs. Therefore, theorising the broader political sentiments that possibly increase the chance of belief in CTs is valuable, especially in light of the violent ways in which CTs are sometimes expressed. The goal is not to acquit violent conspiracy theorists of responsibility but to call for a broader understanding of the origins of conspiracy beliefs.

Conclusion

Ultimately, COVID-19 policies reflect the consensus-based, rational approach to politics that Mouffe argues against in various ways. The Dutch government presents the advice provided by the OMT as an impartial, value-free method of responding to the pandemic. Their advice is cited as the reason for, for example, going into

lockdown. However, this judgement is a normative one, and it requires a valuation of alternatives on which a permanent, rational consensus can never be reached. Mouffe warns of the consequences of not recognising the differences of opinions that stem from the “pluralism of values” inherent to democracy. Should politics be presented as a matter of reasoning from evidence and rational consensus instead of a pluralism of values and the passionate attachment to those values, disagreement becomes a matter of right and wrong. Consequently, it cannot give rise to a legitimate conflict of adversaries. Instead, the idealised view of the possibility of rational consensus will give rise to destructive ways of collective identification. CTs can be seen as an example of such an eruption, as they entail the preclusion of an agonistic view of conflict and firmly increase the likelihood of a violent expression of passions.

Although CTs are emotional (Van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018), it is necessary to combine this assertion with a reformulation of the role of emotion in politics. The belief in most CTs surrounding COVID-19 undermines the possibility of agonistic confrontation, as conspiracy theorists often accuse scientists or the government of deceit. Thus, CTs cannot be viewed as a legitimate expression of passion. However, conspiracy beliefs do not have to be directly platformed in the political debate. Instead, there should be space for disagreement recognised as a valid expression of

A political focus on evidence and reason creates an environment where people will find more radical means of collective identification.

a collective identification mobilised by passion and a plurality of values (Mouffe 2000). A political focus on evidence and reason creates an environment where people will find more radical means of collective identification. To transform antagonism into an agonism, differences in values and the passionate attachment

to those must be recognised as valid, not as a matter of irrationality or malicious intent. However, it is likely difficult to convince those who already believe in CTs not to do so; changing the dominant view of value-free and reasonable consensus as the democratic ideal serves as a starting point. Then, the reformulation of the role of emotion in politics is a preventative measure in which differences in values and passions are not forced outside of the democratic debate where they might become dangerous.

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How Should Professional Journalism Deal with Conspiracy Theories?

Nell Meister

Is Angela Merkel a reptile person? Was Princess Diana's death faked? Do the COVID-19 vaccines contain microchips that will be used to control us? These are just some examples of the numerous conspiracy theories out there, some of them appearing more probable than others. Most professional journalism seems rather dismissive of CTs in general, treating conspiracy theorists as irrational, sometimes even ridiculing them. However, as became clear once more thanks to Edward Snowden's whistleblowing a few years ago, some CTs turn out to be true. Thus, a generally dismissive attitude may not be the ideal response for professional journalists concerning CTs. But what, then, would be an adequate way to encounter the issue? The following paper will address the research question of how professional journalism should treat CTs.

In particular, is it justified to ignore or dismiss them, or is it right to ridicule them and regard them as irrational per se? Should conspiracy theorists, on the contrary, be given a voice and have their beliefs seriously investigated – or are there perhaps, in fact, different kinds of CTs that should be treated in different ways?

For the purpose of answering the research question, political theorist Chantal Mouffe's notion of the role of irrationality and agonism/antagonisms in a democratic society shall be applied in order to explore what consequences her views would have in relation to the issue.

Firstly, the connection between professional journalism and CTs shall be examined, followed by an exploration of the notion of CTs' inherent irrationality and lastly, an analysis and application of Chantal Mouffe's views on the issue.

Historical Perspective

To begin with, the historical relationship between journalism and CTs shall be considered. This is crucial for the question at hand since the way professional journalism often treats CTs is rooted in the former's historical development. What exactly it is that demarcates professional journalism from journalism, in general, will become clear when discussing its historical development as well.

Professional journalism has a history of seeking to establish itself as a profession through objectivity, ethical guidelines and constant critical self-reflection and self-problematisation, amongst others (Bratich 2008, 52). Most significantly, however, it has emerged through seeking to distinguish and distance itself from what the professor for journalism and media, Jack Z. Bratich (Rutgers n.d.), calls "the popular" (Bratich 2008, 53). That is to say, pop culture, populism and unprofessional journalistic uses of technological media such as blogging. More specifically, 20th-century

professionalisation was a response to the ever-growing fields of “yellow journalism” and “muckraking” (Bratich 2008, 59) – both of which were considered irrational and appealing to the lowest aspects of human nature.¹

Muckraking especially was judged as bordering on conspiracy theorising. That can be seen in Walter Lippmann’s writings, for instance, who was one of the most influential political columnists of the twentieth century (Britannica 2021). When discussing the practice of muckraking, he states: “The sense of conspiracy and secret scheming which transpire is almost uncanny. ‘Big Business’ and its ruthless tentacles

*Muckraking especially
was judged as bordering
on conspiracy theorising.*

have become the material for the feverish fantasy of illiterate thousands thrown out of kilter by the rack and strain of modern life. It is possible to work yourself into a state where the world seems a conspiracy and your daily going is beset with an alert and tingling sense of labyrinthine evil”²

(Lippman 1914, 1). As can be seen in this citation, conspiracy theorising seems to be regarded here as the peak of irrationality and thus the very representation of what professional journalism has been working to distinguish itself from. It is seen as inherently irrational and becomes the representation of the Other that has helped professional journalism as such emerge.

Inherent Irrationality

And indeed, there are some voices defending such identification of CTs with the irrational. The Australian philosopher Steve Clarke (2002), for instance, argues that conspiracy theorists share an irrational tendency to cling to their beliefs even after seeing the evidence pointing against them, which justifies a prima-facie scepticism towards them in his view. Admitting that this tendency also exists in the field of theoretical science, in the article “Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing”, Clarke argues there to be a fundamental difference between what a conspiracy theorist does when clinging to their theory in such a way and a scientist doing the same.

However, Clarke’s analysis of the situation seems to be somewhat lacking. He seeks to differentiate the scientist from the conspiracy theorist by pointing to the

1 Yellow journalism is a form of journalism characterised by the use of many pictures, big, misleading headlines, exclamation points and an overall focus on grabbing the viewer’s attention and riling up their passions rather than presenting the fact in a truthful and balanced way (Bratich 2008, 59). Muckraking refers to a form of political journalism aimed at digging up scandals and conspiracies, publishing them typically without much proof to support their claims (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). Professional journalism sought to fight these irrational attention-grabbing forms by countering them with strictly rational science- and information-focussed reporting (Bratich 2008, 59).

2 In this quote, Lippman is also quite dismissive of illiterate people and seems to stereotype them.

career the researcher may stand to lose and the ties of responsibility towards their hypothetical team, while the conspiracy theorist would – according to Clarke – socially only stand to gain from abandoning their beliefs.

Here it seems like Clarke is underestimating the strong aspect of identification that connects the scientist to their research program just as much as it does the conspiracy theorist with their theory. The social gain that Clarke supposes the conspiracy theorist to attain when abandoning their beliefs may very well, in fact, entail giving up part of their identity in their eyes – after all, a substantial part of being a conspiracy theorist is seeing the supposed truth that is hidden from others. It may not be as desirable to become reintegrated into academic society for the conspiracy theorist as Clarke hints at.

Additionally, the researcher is not alone in having a team count on them – the conspiracy theorist, too, may very well be part of a bigger network that counts on them and would see a renouncement of their shared beliefs as a betrayal.

Finally, it becomes evident that the supposed irrationality in believing in a theory even though evidence points the other way is something shared by both conspiracy theorists and scientists – it seems naive to argue that one's refusal is a sign of irrationality while the other one is not.

The Journalist as a Conspiracy Theorist

The philosopher David Coady would agree with this conclusion. This becomes evident in his argument against the apparent alienation of journalism and conspiracy theorists, where he claims that a good investigative political journalist needs to be a conspiracy theorist themselves to some extent in order to do their job properly.

This he bases on his definition of the conspiracy theorist as “a person unusually willing to investigate conspiracy” (Coady 2007, 196). People like that are crucial in a democratic system, he argues, since evidently political conspiracies do happen and not too rarely and providing the population with access to information about official as well as unofficial political ongoing is central for a healthy democracy. Investigative journalists take on the task of informing the public about the unofficial ongoing, which often include conspiracies, and thus obviously, Coady's definition of conspiracy theorists applies to them. Therefore, journalism and conspiracy theorising are, in fact, closely intertwined.

Furthermore, Coady (2007) does admit that there is the risk for the investigative journalist to become overly confident in the object of their investigation. When that happens, they can become a conspiracy theorist in Clarke's sense: they overestimate the significance of their evidence or ignore counterevidence. This risk exists in any profession: the scientist is subjected to it just the same as the conspiracy theorist – here, Coady and Clarke seem to be in agreement. Conspiracy theorising in this sense of believing in a conspiracy even when facing overwhelming counterevidence does admittedly involve an element of irrationality - which is shared by the previously

discussed scientist clinging to their theory –, but as Coady (2007, 196) shows, and contrary to Clarke's claims, it is not an irrationality inherent to CTs as such. Believing in a flat earth, for instance, is irrational because it has been proven without a doubt that the earth is not flat. However, conspiracies obviously do exist and therefore believing in them is not irrational per se.

This shows that the relationship between journalism and CTs is quite complex and warrants a different solution than a generally dismissive attitude based on a presupposed irrationality inherent to CTs. But what, then, would be the proper way to deal with the issue? Perhaps an answer can be found in the works of Chantal Mouffe.

Mouffe's Philosophy

Firstly, Mouffe is a Belgian political theorist arguing for a leftist populism. Before applying her thought to the question at hand, naturally, the relevant aspects of her political theory require some explanation, namely Mouffe's notions of value pluralism, antagonisms and agonism.

To begin with, Mouffe (2013, 2) regards human society as inherently antagonistic. This is caused by the inescapable value of pluralism which characterises

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Western democracies with their individualistic culture in particular. Forming a lasting rational consensus between several of these views is impossible because of their conflictual character: even though temporary compromises between groups with different values can be made – this is what politics does – those

compromises cannot last. They inevitably will have to be re-evaluated and renegotiated after a certain amount of time.

Antagonisms can become quite dangerous as they usually construe the opposing side as the enemy who needs to be vanquished – sometimes by any means necessary. Therefore, the only way to properly deal with our antagonisms in a safe and sufficient way, according to Mouffe (2013, 7), would be to transform them into what she calls “agonism”. While antagonists are enemies aiming for each other's destruction, in agonism, the involved parties are mere adversaries who disagree on certain issues but still respect each other and each other's rights under any circumstances. This transformation of antagonisms into agonism can be achieved by providing and making use of suitable channels for discussion. Only with this transformation do the aforementioned temporary agreements become possible in a pluralistic society such as the one we live in. Now, those suitable channels could, for instance, be provided

through politics. This seems quite logical since the political debate is a common way to carry out disagreements on fundamental values and their realisation in an ordered and respectful way in a democratic society.

Furthermore, Mouffe (2000, 104) claims that when politics fail to channel a population's passions and to provide groups people can identify with, the latter will find other – potentially dangerous – ways to fulfil those needs and carry out their antagonistic conflicts. This is to say, if political parties and figures fail to engage the public sufficiently, their thus unbound passions and unfulfilled need for something greater than themselves to identify with find another outlet. Such an outlet can be religious fundamentalism, for instance, or even the foundation of terrorist groups (Mouffe 2000, 104). Therefore, not engaging the public's passions and leaving their antagonistic conflicts as they are can lead to radicalisation and have quite harmful consequences.

Applying Mouffe – Precarious Passions

There are two possible ways of applying those ideas to the discussion of CTs in professional journalism which shall be considered subsequently.

On the one hand, at first glance, it seems like CTs may be a case of the population's crystallised passions that politics has failed to give a direction. After all, most CTs do seem to fit the criteria quite well: they provide their supporters with a network and a greater cause to identify with and can help channel built-up passions. For instance, consider the theory that the COVID-19 vaccines contain microchips which some group of powerful conspirators placed there in order to track people's movements. The belief in this theory gives a follower the certainty of being part of a relatively small group which knows the truth about a fundamental wrong that is being done to countless people. This conveys a feeling of purpose and provides them with a specific group to identify with. Being spread via social media, the CT additionally creates a network within which close connections can be built upon the idea of being part of a minority standing together, fighting a malevolent, powerful force. The theory at hand can channel built-up passions by giving members a clearly defined enemy, e.g. their government or a group of rich and influential individuals. The followers' frustrations with the current pandemic, politics, their personal lives, etcetera can be focussed on that entity that conspires to harm them and others and be channelled in efforts to gain more followers or simply into rants about the evil-doers.

According to this interpretation, it may indeed be dangerous to fuel those crystallisations by giving them serious consideration and attention via journalistic media, since this could help the CTs to reach more people and convince them of their respective cause, and thus grow in power and influence. The consequences of that could be drastic because of the tendency of undirected crystallisations of passions to radicalise and eventually lash out – perhaps in a violent way. This danger is largely based on the antagonistic nature of undirected conflict in a pluralistic society. In the specific case

of CTs, it can be argued that the sense of serving a greater cause that presents one group as the One, the Knowing, the Righteous and another as the Other, the Enemy, the Conspirators, the Wrong-Doers further adds to the explosiveness.³

Consequently, professional journalism would have to be careful to distance itself from conspiracy theorists' views when discussing them, or perhaps it would even be best not to discuss them at all to avoid attracting more members.

On another note, the underlying structural issues that cause the need for CTs as a means of identification and passion-channelling would need to be addressed. Fulfilling the aforementioned needs in politics sufficiently would, in fact, make CTs superfluous, according to this interpretation, and enable an agonistic discharge of society's inherent conflicts. CTs would become less common and perhaps even cease to exist entirely.

However, as previously mentioned, some CTs do turn out to be true. This, in addition to the close relationship between investigative journalism and conspiracy theorising, points towards the conclusion that there might be more to the phenomenon of CTs than this interpretation indicates. At least some conspiracy theorists are actually onto a truth that, without them, may have remained hidden; thus, simply dismissing them as a by-product of political failure, which we should aim to eradicate, does not seem to do the issue justice.

Applying Mouffe – Tools of Transformation

As indicated before, there is a second way of applying Mouffian notions to the question of how professional journalism should deal with CTs: it seems like the media's role may, in fact, be to function as an alternative channel for discussion through which conspiracy theorists and other disagreeing groups can carry out their conflicts within the agonistic dimension. The antagonistic conflict of conspiracy theorists and, e.g., opposing scientists or some of the journalists themselves could be provided with a platform over which an agonistic exchange – a discussion between equals without mutual demonisation or the framing of the respective other as the enemy – is made possible. This way, the tensions would be defused, and peaceful coexistence of the conflicting values and views would become possible. Thus, instead of judging CTs as potentially dangerous crystallisations of passions that can and should be made superfluous, this interpretation would accept their advocates as adversaries that are to be respected.

The consequences of this interpretation for the research question would entail for professional journalism to take CTs more seriously than has been the case and to give supporters of CTs serious consideration and an equal chance to make their case instead of treating them as irrational or ridiculous per se. Concretely, this could, for

3 Of course, for completeness' sake there is also the third, largest group of the Unknowing, Uninvolved, Deceived – the general population, the non-believers, the sheep.

instance, take on the form of professional journalists engaging with and evaluating conspiracy theorists' beliefs without bias and perhaps giving chosen representatives interview opportunities on eye level or the chance to write and publish opinion pieces or columns and such in professional journalistic media.

Conclusion

In conclusion, historically, professional journalism has developed by defining itself as the rational counterpart to the irrational popular. CTs have been regarded as a representation of the latter. However, it has been shown that a simple dismissal of CTs on the basis of a supposed inherent irrationality is, in fact, unjustified. Conspiracies do happen, so believing in them is not irrational per se. In addition, a *prima facie* dismissal of CTs cannot reasonably be based on the irrationality that lies in the act of holding on to a theory in the face of overwhelming counterevidence either, since that behaviour is a risk present in any profession and thus does not prove the existence of an inherent irrationality in a field. In science, for example, the described tendency does not seem to provoke the same general public dismissal as it does for CTs.

*In science, for example,
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Plus, the similarity between a conspiracy theorist and an investigative political journalist provides further support for the claim that the relationship between the two sides is more complicated than the generally dismissive attitude of professional journalism towards CTs would lead one to believe.

Applying Mouffe's views to the discussion provides some clarity. Two possible interpretations emerge: one of them, leading to the conclusion that CTs are potentially dangerous means of channelling a politically unengaged public's passions, can be dismissed on the basis of a history of CTs turning out to be true. At the very least, it can be concluded that some CTs must transcend this first interpretation.

The other possible view, which has been argued here to be the more fitting option, frames professional journalism as the means of transformation which enables the conflict surrounding CTs to take on an agonistic form and thus defuse the dangers of the formerly related antagonism. Therefore, professional journalism should generally engage seriously with CTs instead of simply dismissing them solely because of a negatively received label, and even consider giving supporters a voice in some cases, or at the very least serious consideration.

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The Logic of Conspiracy Theories

A Mathematical Analysis of a 9/11 Conspiracy Theory

Nienke Wessel

Mathematicians may be defined as those who, whatever concept of proof they may have, believe only what they can prove. (Boolos and Sambin 1991, 1)

Introduction

Humanity has a longstanding tradition of trying to formalise our steps of reasoning to give us some assurance that this reasoning is indeed solid. This turns out to be non-trivial. The relationship between natural language, the language we use in our everyday life, such as the language I use to write this section, and any formal language (i.e., mathematical) is a blurry one, where it seems somewhat impossible to perfectly translate one into the other.

Nonetheless, that does not stop us from trying. As George Boolos and Giovanni Sambin succinctly argue in the quote at the top of this page, mathematicians only believe what they can prove. I would argue that this holds for most people out there, not only those conventionally considered mathematicians. Mathematicians and non-mathematicians may have different ideas about what constitutes “proof”, but it seems that (almost) everyone needs some form of “proof” to believe in something.

In this everlasting quest to formalise our language, mathematicians, philosophers, and linguists have tried to come up with systems that allow us to do so. The idea: if we can formalise language, we can say with certainty that reasoning is sound. In this chapter, I intend to walk through some of these systems. Specifically, I apply these ideas to what has become known as “conspiracy theories” (CTs). After all, these ideas have often been branded “irrational”¹. If the endeavour to put natural language into logic has been remotely successful, it should be possible to encode the (ir)rationality of these theories into our formal logic. After all, if the idea that we only believe what can be proven holds any water, we should see how far we can get in proving the truth or falsehood of a CT. While this has been applied to other domains (see, e.g., Iacona 2018), this paper is the first to do so for CTs.

This brings me to the central question in the rest of this chapter: “what can modal logical representations of CTs tell us about their (ir)rationality?”

The remainder of this chapter will be divided into three parts. First, an introduction to different types of logic will be provided. This will necessarily be high-level and leave out many of the mathematical details so as to not burden the reader too much. The examples will be drawn from common CTs. The second part of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion on how to apply these ideas to CTs and to what extent this is possible. The central case study is the theory that Bush had a hand in 9/11. This

1 See e.g., Buening and Taylor (2010) for a history of this.

theory will be used to illustrate how these logical formalisations work, but also what their limits are. The final part of this chapter is a conclusion in which all arguments will be briefly summarised, and some conclusions will be drawn.

Introduction to Logic

Logical reasoning is often posited to be the hallmark of modern society. We reason, and we think; about what is true, what is not true, what we can derive from these things and more. Mathematicians like to formalise reasoning, which is why they invented mathematical logic. In this part of the chapter, I will try to explain mathematical logic as clearly as possible. I will draw on examples from CTs, which will help us work towards the general goal of this chapter: analysing CTs with different types of logic.

Classical Logic

While I want to discuss a more complicated type of logic, it is indispensable to understand something about “classical” logic first. This is a type of logic that can be traced back to Ancient Greece (Bobzien 2006) but became more well-known and wide-spread in the Middle Ages after its reinvention by Peter Abelard (Marenbon 2007, 136–139). After him, logicians devised different logical systems, of which the most widespread is propositional logic.

This type of logic is concerned with statements which can be either true or false; there is no in-between. Types of logic that allow that follow later. Some examples:

$p :=$ Bush committed 9/11

$q :=$ Al-Qaeda committed 9/11

I will leave it up to the reader to decide whether these two propositional statements are true or false; just remember that they must be either of these. We can then, recursively, combine these types of statements into new statements with the help of symbols. For example, we can say

$p \vee q =$ Bush committed 9/11 or Al-Qaeda committed 9/11 (or they both did)

In propositional logic, the $\vee$ means either p or q or both. This is called an ‘inclusive or’; we do not exclude the possibility that both are true.

We can also make statements where we enforce both to be true. For example:

$p \wedge q =$ Bush committed 9/11 and Al-Qaeda committed 9/11

In more natural language, this would be “both Bush and al-Qaeda committed 9/11”. Note that this does not necessarily say anything about whether they did so together or whether they made separate plans. This is a very important distinction between logical language and natural language. This is also one of the reasons to use logic: to make reasoning clean and pinpoint any unspoken assumptions. In this case, such an unspoken assumption would be that if the two parties both committed 9/11, they must have worked together. This is a statement that does not follow our current assumptions, so we have found something we need to add to our assumptions if we want to say anything about any type of collaboration.

We can also negate statements. An example:

$$\neg q = \text{Al-Qaeda did not commit 9/11}$$

Finally, we can make implications. These are basically if-then statements:

$$\neg q \rightarrow p = \text{if Al-Qaeda did not commit 9/11, then Bush committed 9/11}$$

Again, it is up to the reader to decide whether they think this statement is true in our current world.

The question one should be asking themselves is: if Al-Qaeda did not commit 9/11, is it necessarily the case that Bush must have done so? Is there really not any other type of explanation possible? Is it possible that neither Bush nor Al-Qaeda did it, and instead, former President Obama is involved?

To be more economic with symbols, we can replace p and q with $D(\text{Bush})$ and $D(\text{Al-Qaeda})$, respectively, where we define $D(x)$ as

$$D(x) := x \text{ committed 9/11}$$

Modal Logic

While this logic is very powerful and has survived the test of time (it is still taught in universities to philosophers, mathematicians, and even computer scientists), it is not without its problems, such as that it is prone to paradoxes. For an explanation of these problems in more detail, I refer the interested reader to Boolos and Sambin (1991), who also provide a very detailed historical account of the solution to these problems: modal logic. For a rigorous mathematical-philosophical treatment of modal logic, I refer to Williamson (2015) and Garson (2013), who has also been used as the basis for the following section.

While everything is either true or false in propositional logic, we introduce the idea of possibility in modal logic. That means we can talk about things that are either always false, or always true or simply possibly true and possibly false. This opens a realm of possibilities, both in that we can get closer to the type of statements we make in natural language and in that it gives us a way of formalising the intuitive notion that some things might be possible, but we do not know enough to say whether they are true. The reader might have experienced this feeling when reading the previous section, as I left it to the reader to determine whether certain statements were true or false.

Again, I will need to introduce the necessary mathematical symbols. If we want to say a statement is necessarily true, we will use $\Box$. For example:

$$\Box D(\text{Bush}) = \text{Bush must have committed 9/11}$$

When making the connection between a statement like $\Box D(\text{Bush})$ and the real world, we see that the propositional logical statement $D(\text{Bush})$ and the modal logical statement $\Box D(\text{Bush})$ have the same real world meaning: it was Bush who committed 9/11, and there is no doubt he was involved. Of course, the reader is free to decide whether they believe these statements to be true in our world.

If this was all there was to modal logic, there would be no reason to use it. Like I said before, there is also the possibility of expressing a possibility in modal logic, something we like to do in natural language. In modal logic, that looks like this:

$$\Diamond D(\text{Bush}) = \text{it is possible that Bush committed 9/11}$$

Other possible translations to natural language include: “Bush might have committed 9/11” or “there is a chance Bush committed 9/11”. Sometimes philosophers call something that is maybe true *contingent*, and using this idea in proof is actually very old. See, for example, Ibn Senna’s/Avicenna’s proof that God exists using this type of logical reasoning.

We can still combine statements into new statements, such as (again, it is up to the reader whether they think the statements are plausible or not):

$$\Box D(\text{Bush}) \wedge \Diamond D(\text{Al-Qaeda}) =$$

Bush must have committed 9/11 and Al-Qaeda may have committed 9/11

This concludes the introduction to logic, as the tools necessary have been discussed.

On the Relationship between Logical and Natural Languages

Now that we have discussed how to formalise natural language, it is time to take a look at how this can be used to analyse CTs. There are several notes to be made.

In the previous section, I gave several examples of how to translate ideas into logical formulas. The question always was: is this a good translation? Not: is the sentence

(either its natural language or logical form) true? The following section *is* concerned with truth because this link to truth is precisely what we need to say something about (ir)rationality. After all, there is the often-implicit belief that if we can prove something to be mathematically true, it is rational to believe in it. If something is disproven, then it is irrational to believe in it. This is the central assumption for the discussion below. Obviously, there are several important aspects to keep in mind. For example, the proof is worthless if it does not correspond properly to the real world. These will be discussed in the second part of this section. First, I want to look at where one arrives if one assumes that proof indeed equals a belief that something is rational. Let us look at such proof.

Believe in Possibilities

In this section, I am going to prove that it is possible that 9/11 was committed by Bush (a famous CT). Before I can do that, I need to define more clearly what I mean by “Bush did it”, as there are many different 9/11 conspiracies. I use one of the theories from Hargrove, and Stempel (2007), which states:

The collapse of the Twin Towers in New York was aided by explosives secretly planted in the two buildings.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will add to this that the planting of explosives was done by Bush (either he planted them himself or he had them planted).

In order to complete my proof, I need to prove that Bush had everything needed to commit 9/11. So, what is necessary to commit 9/11? Let us simplify a bit by assuming the following aspects to be necessary (based on the idea of motive, means and opportunity (MMO), often used in investigations, e.g., Ang, Dinar, and Lucas (2014)) for a person x to commit 9/11:

- $M(x) := x$ had sufficient money (means).
- $C(x) := x$ had contact with people that are willing to kill themselves (means).
- $R(x) := x$ had a motive to commit 9/11 (motive).
- $A(x) := x$ had access to the Twin Towers (opportunity).

Perhaps someone else would have added more conditions than I did. For those conditions, the reasoning followed below will likely still hold, and I believe it is possible to argue why Bush *could* fulfil that condition. To illustrate that, I will now argue for the provided four conditions that Bush could have fulfilled.

According to CNN, the Bush family had millions of dollars already in 1999 (Jackson 1999). We can therefore give the following statement:

$M(\text{Bush}) = \text{Bush had sufficient money}$

, which has the truth value “true”. To be more careful, however, let us assume $\Diamond$ (Bush) has truth value “true”.

It is harder to determine with some definiteness that Bush had the right connections, but as he was the then-president, it seems very likely that he knew quite a few people. If he wanted to, he could have come into contact with people that would be willing to die, even ones from the Middle East. If not for religious reasons, perhaps to get money for their families or for other reasons. Let us, therefore, add the following proposition to our repertoire:

$C(\text{Bush})$ = Bush had contact with people willing to kill themselves

As we are not sure that Bush knew such people, we leave the truth value for $C(\text{Bush})$ in the open and instead claim that $\Diamond C(\text{Bush})$ is true, i.e., it is *possible* Bush knew such people.

Now, as for the question of motive, we turn to the vast body of literature on this CT. The motive I found to be the most common is that the US wanted to invade the Middle East, more specifically Iraq (see, e.g., Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel (2007) and Knight (2008)). Surely, 9/11 gave Bush the needed social momentum to start another war in the Middle East. So, Bush could have had a motive.

$R(\text{Bush})$ = Bush had a motive to commit 9/11

We can conclude that $\Diamond R(\text{Bush})$ has truth value “true”.

Finally, as the Twin Towers were located on US soil, it seems that access to the building should be no problem. Hence:

$A(\text{Bush})$ = Bush had access to the Twin Towers

So $\Diamond A(\text{Bush})$ also has truth value “true”.

Now we have all the necessary ingredients, let us see what we can cook up. The list of requirements provided above can be translated into a formula. I argue that when someone has means, motive and opportunity (MMO), they could have committed 9/11. I hope you as readers agree with this. If so, the following formula has truth value “true”:

$$(M(x) \wedge C(x) \wedge R(x) \wedge A(x)) \rightarrow \Diamond D(x)$$

This is quite a neat formula, but I am going to make one small adjustment. Instead of saying that if someone *has* MMO, they could have done it, I am going to change this to say that if someone *could have* MMO, they could have done it. This is a slightly stronger statement but just as valid, in my opinion. After all, there is a possibility

they do have MMO, so there is also a possibility that they could have done it. In other words, it is impossible to exclude that they have done it because we cannot determine with certainty that they did *not* have MMO. This is the renewed formula²:

$$(\Diamond M(x) \wedge \Diamond C(x) \wedge \Diamond R(x) \wedge \Diamond A(x)) \rightarrow \Diamond D(x)$$

Our formula is ready to be applied to our case at hand, $x = \text{Bush}$.

$$(\Diamond M(\text{Bush}) \wedge \Diamond C(\text{Bush}) \wedge \Diamond R(\text{Bush}) \wedge \Diamond A(\text{Bush})) \rightarrow \Diamond D(\text{Bush})$$

Remember that we assume this formula is true: if Bush could have had MMO, then he could have committed 9/11. Now, looking back at the definition of $\rightarrow$ (“if ... then” in my previous sentence), this formula is true precisely when, in every case, the part before the $\rightarrow$ is true, the part after the $\rightarrow$ is also true. So, one needs to look at whether the part before the $\rightarrow$ is true. This part is:

$$(\Diamond M(x) \wedge \Diamond C(x) \wedge \Diamond R(x) \wedge \Diamond A(x))$$

This part is only true if each of the individual formulas (i.e., $\Diamond M(\text{Bush})$, $\Diamond C(\text{Bush})$, $\Diamond R(\text{Bush})$, and $\Diamond A(\text{Bush})$) is true. This was already decided in the discussion above. Hence, if the premise (the part before the $\rightarrow$) is true and the formula as a whole is true, logical reasoning tells us the part after the $\rightarrow$, the conclusion must also be true: we have reached the perhaps terrifying conclusion that Bush could have committed 9/11.

Yet, this is not as terrifying as it might seem. As said quite a few times before, this is all about possibilities. The chance that Bush did it is not very big (at least, I do not think it is). Nonetheless, there is a chance he did do it. The logical discussion above formalises that idea of possibility.

Now, if we, as I promised I would do in this section, assume that proving something with a formula means it is rational to believe it, I conclude it is not irrational to believe in the possibility of Bush committing 9/11. Rather, it would be irrational to believe it to not be possible at all. Similarly, it would be irrational to believe this is the only explanation. I could repeat the above exercise with $x = \text{Al-Qaeda}$, and not much would change. It is also very possible for Al-Qaeda to have done it. Believing not so is just as irrational as believing Bush could never have done it. At least from a modal logic point of view.

This idea of CTs not being irrational, as long as we see them in terms of possible explanations, is not unique. Coady (2007), for example, writes about similar views on this topic: completely disregarding a CT is just as irrational as believing that one is the only possible explanation. Coady calls people who disregard CTs completely “coincidence theorists” (2007, 197), who are just as irrational as people traditionally consid-

2 Note that I secretly used that $\Diamond(A \wedge B)$ implies $(\Diamond A \wedge \Diamond B)$ to split up MMO into its different parts (the other way around is not true!) (Garson 2021).

ered conspiracy theorists. Hence, following the logical analysis I sketched above, we get a quantification of Coady's notion of someone "too willing" (2007, 203) or "excessively willing" (2007, 196) to believe in conspiracy and of the notion of someone "too reluctant to believe in conspiracy" (2007, 203). After all, completely disregarding the possibility of something *is* irrational, whether that be a conspiracy or a more mundane explanation.

Lost in Translation

In the previous section, I assumed that it was possible to make a perfect translation of the real world into logical formulas. Sadly, this is not the case. This puts some serious limitations on the claims made in the previous section. I am going to discuss these limitations now.

First of all, translation from natural language to logical formulas is not always clear-cut. It might be ambiguous both ways (Iacona 2018, 23). Consider for example the following statement:

Everyone loves someone

Does this mean that everyone loves the same person? Or is there at least one person for every person out there, but does this not need to be the same person? The other way around, we already saw that logical sentences could have multiple natural language translations. This ambiguity stems from natural language, not from logical language. We would like any logical language to be free of ambiguities; otherwise, we cannot make our proofs. The languages described above are like that. However, that is a problem: we need to do translations between something that is ambiguous into something that is not. Our translation process is therefore flawed: it is unable to provide a 100 per cent correct translation every time. This is a severe limitation of the process.

There is also the problem of context. Take a look at the following sentence:

Avril Lavigne is dead

At the time of writing, most people would say this is not true. Avril Lavigne very much appears to be alive. Yet, there is the CT that she has died and has been replaced by a lookalike (see, e.g., a blog post like Generation95 (2021) for an explanation of this theory; there has sadly not been any academic research into the phenomenon). So again, depending on one's worldview, the truth value might be very different. However, it is also the case that if we look at this sentence some hundred years into the future, everyone will very likely believe this sentence is true (if they still know who "Avril Lavigne" refers to, that is).

This might seem like an extreme example, but the problem is also present in the example above: Bush refers to George W. Bush, president at the time (2001, using the Gregorian calendar) of the United States of America. Not to any other Bush in the world. The phrase “committing 9/11” refers to a very specific historical event; it already came up earlier in the paper that this phrase was too vague; I had to clarify it. Therefore, one needs all kinds of contextual clues to make sense of what is happening here. While I tried my best to make as much use as possible of the logical representations above, it is not quite all the way there. If I had pursued this, the formulas would have had to include all kinds of contextual information, making them unwieldy. Yet, not doing so makes the reasoning more error-prone; after all, the idea of using logical formulas is that it gives us some sense of security that the reasoning is valid.

Overall, we can see that there are some serious theoretical and practical issues with using logical representations of natural language. These hold in general, but also in our case of CTs.

Conclusion

In this paper, I used modal logic to prove that Bush could have committed 9/11. The central goal was to see what modal logic could tell us about the (ir)rationality of believing in CTs. If we accept the idea that something is rational to believe if logic can prove it, then we reach the conclusion that it is not necessarily irrational to believe that Bush could have committed 9/11 or in CTs in general. Rather, completely disregarding this possibility or any other possibility is irrational. This line of thinking reminds us of philosophers like Coady (2007).

Sadly, the transformation process of transforming natural language into modal logical language is far from perfect. Natural language is ambiguous. This limitation should be kept in mind.

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Is Everything We Know A Conspiracy Theory?

Elia Rossi

Secret, dangerous, irrational. False ideas are created by extremist people to explain what they cannot understand. That is how most of us would describe conspiracy theories. What if, however, this exact definition of CT was a CT itself? Would we consider ourselves dangerous and irrational? Perhaps not. Surely, though, we would not consider ourselves conspiracy theorists as we only believe in true theories. Unfortunately for you, in this very paper, I will claim that the mere fact of believing in something implies believing in a potential CT.

This work attempts to dismantle the belief that CTs are inherently irrational and different from what the philosopher David Coady would call “official explanations” (Coady 2006, 3). Specifically, I will explore whether it is possible to claim that all theories are (potential) CTs. In fact, it is widely believed and visible from papers like “Of Conspiracy Theories” (Keeley 1999) that CTs cannot be trusted and that they are different from the other types of knowledge we possess in society. In response, I will prove that there is no actual difference between the two types of theory (CT and official theory) besides the power supporting them. Hence, CTs and official theories are the same if not for their practical acceptance within society. To prove this point, I will substantiate my ideas with arguments inspired by the paper “Conspiracy Theories and Truth Trajectories” (Pelkmans and Machold 2011). I will finally study whether the similarities and differences found can allow the claim of a deep separation between CTs and official theories, therefore understanding whether everything we know is actually a CT.

The paper will initially focus on understanding what CTs and other theories are, as it is essential to know what the subject being questioned is to realise the importance of the claim as well as its essence. This will be done through the analysis of Coady’s definition of CTs. We will then move towards attacking the theoretical differentiation found between CTs and official theories, mainly rejecting the prominent position of the philosopher Brian Keeley. Afterwards, the paper will move to Thomas S. Kuhn’s understanding of theories of knowledge. The reason is to move to a more practical approach for the claim of a lack of epistemic differences between CTs and official theories. The paper will end by finding the only difference between CTs and official theories in the work of professors Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold, drawing its conclusion from there.

Understanding What a Conspiracy Theory Is

First of all, it is crucial to define and understand what a CT is and why it differs from other types of theory. It is commonly believed that CTs differ from official theories because of the irrational aspect of the former and the rational one of the latter. David Coady, one of the main exponents of the field of CTs, defines them as “an explana-

tion that is contrary to an explanation that has official status at the time and place in question” (Coady 2006, 2). The mere absence of irrationality in the definition already shows Coady’s understanding of CTs as not inherently irrational. CTs might actually be irrational (as he claims in his article “Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational” (Coady

CTs are named as such, not because of their inherent irrationality but because of their opposition to the view accepted by the official accounts, the official theory.

2007)), but that is not a given; it is not always the case. Perhaps irrationality is mainly found in CTs rather than official theories because of the limited number of official theories compared to the quasi-infinite CTs. Such asymmetry in quantity makes it undoubtedly more probable for

irrationality to be found in a CT rather than an official theory. However, the presence of some rotten, irrational eggs in CTs should not impact the perception of all the other eggs, as all eggs are created by different individuals/institutions and only kept in the same container. CTs are named as such, not because of their inherent irrationality but, reading Coady, solely because of their opposition to the view accepted by the official accounts, the official theory. Following this, it seems self-evident that CTs have the same aim as official theories - to be truthful “postulated explanations of phenomena in the world” (Pelkmans and Machold 2011, 68). Thus, even when considering their aims, CTs are not profoundly different from official theories.

In his definition of CT, Coady creates a new way of distinguishing theories – CTs and official theories. Official theories are, to him, “a version of events propagated by an institution which has the power to influence what is widely believed at a particular time and place” (Coady 2007, 200). Hence, it appears that he does not see CTs differ from official theories due to a lack of rationality. He just sees the two types of theories differ on the amounts of epistemic authorities supporting them or not. That is also why he specifies “influence in a particular time and place” (Coady 2007, 200) when defining CT – because influence is precarious and will eventually disappear as different generations trust different individuals or organisations. Consequently, other influential accounts might have different “true theories” than the official theories, making the official theory slowly lose its following. Making the official theory less official also allows another theory, a CT, to become the new official. Coady finds the truthfulness of a theory to depend on official accounts – “trustworthy” media, powerful politicians, and famous academics supporting a theory. Official accounts hold and influence massive followings by being constantly seen by the population. They make people only listen to one side of the story, their side of the story. All other alternatives, no matter their content (Coady 2006, 10), appear as CTs that want to go against the truth since they go against the norm. Official accounts receive their status with time and achievements; that is why we are taught to trust them. However, Coady

says we should follow the official accounts only until “the official institutions responsible for gathering [...] information in one’s society are trustworthy” (Coady 2006, 10). It follows that if one no longer believes in the trustworthiness of an institution, that person is entitled to look for an alternative theory that appears more trustworthy (even if less popular), a CT.

One objection arising from the claim of a lack of epistemic difference between CTs and official theories is the one of Keeley. He claims CTs and official theories differ on an epistemological level as only CTs use what he calls “errant data” (Keeley 1999, 117). Errant data is information “that, if true, would contradict the received account” (Keeley 1999, 118) and/or “data that go unexplained by the received account” (Keeley 1999, 118). Conspiracy theorists find errant data to create the need for a new, alternative theory as they believe “the better theory is the one that provides a unified explanation of more phenomena than competing explanations” (Keeley 1999, 119), and CTs do that. Keeley claims that the creation of CTs due to the discovery of errant data within official theories is not justified since errant data can be found everywhere as they are created and found by humans who commit mistakes by nature. Furthermore, the presence of errant data in theories does not necessarily mean that the whole theory is flawed and, hence, does not create the need for an alternative explanation. Conspiracy theorists want to find the most vicious reasons behind each and every phenomenon when, sometimes, things just happen and have to be accepted. “People just do things” (Keeley 1999, 126). However, is it not the whole point of a theory to explain a phenomenon sufficiently and not, as he essentially says, just to partially explain it and accept all its flaws? Furthermore, is it not the same idea of errant data that also creates the need for a theory? With this, I mean that every theory, no matter if conspiracy or official theories, has the scope of explaining something because the previous theories were either misdescribing it as “contradictory data” (Keeley 1999, 118) or ignoring the issue taken into account by the theory, “unaccounted-for data” (Keeley 1999, 118). Hence, even official theories are characterised by the same errant data he finds characteristics of just CTs. Therefore, even when considering Keeley’s view, CTs still appear to be no different from official theories on an epistemological level. In fact, they both use errant data and aim to explain phenomena even when, as he says, things just happen.

To summarise: since both CTs and official theories agree on explaining phenomena in the best possible way and are both not inherently irrational, a proper explanation for the difference between the two types of theory must be found. Otherwise, everything we know is a CT.

The Official Story

Some might affirm that official stories remain official for long periods, perhaps forever, even when new governments are created, and old influential accounts are substituted by new ones. Hence, since some theories appear never to disappear and are

pillars of truth, they must be correct and cannot be potentially the same as CTs. After all, if official views were flawed, the influential people would realise those flaws and make sure to dismiss the current official theories to consider alternative approaches, right? People always compare all possible alternative views and give each theory an equal possibility to be analysed and understood. Is it not true? I am afraid I have to disagree with both claims. Kuhn, perhaps the most influential philosopher of science of the past century, claims that the very fact of having competing alternative theories within a field does not allow such theories to be objectively compared and fully understood by parties. In fact, as the philosopher Ian Hacking comments on Kuhn, “after a revolution, scientists, in the field that has been changed, work in a different world” (Kuhn 2012, xxviii). Therefore, if I am raised being told that the earth is spherical,

After all, if official views were flawed, the influential people would realise those flaws and make sure to dismiss the current official theories to consider alternative approaches, right?

even if many new (better or worse) alternative views are constituted, I will, most likely, not entirely be able to see the extent to which those alternatives are better. I will just see an alternative view that, presumably, I will not endorse. The only way for me to approve of the new theory would be to either be influenced to believe the alternative theory and dismiss the

old one or, as Kuhn claims, to be deeply attracted by the resolution of the old flaws that the new theory offers. Kuhn is confident that the reason why we change official theories (paradigms, in his case) is not because one theory is true and the other one is inherently wrong, but instead because one theory can explain the way we see reality with the slightest flaws possible according to “our” world. “Progress... is not a simple line leading to the truth. It is more progress away from less adequate...interactions of the world” (Kuhn 2012, xi). Hence, following his claims, it seems unreasonable to claim CTs to be irrational and profoundly different from official theories because they describe an interaction with the world we do not agree with as much as the theories we follow. CTs are just interactions with the world that we (not everyone) do not find as adequate as those proposed by official theories. Those interactions, though, are worthy and plausible, nevertheless.

Equal Plausibility

An objection against the equal epistemic plausibility of CTs and official theories is that of philosophers like Quassim Cassam, who claim official theories are just better and more plausible overall (Cassam 2019). That is why CTs are not like official theories to them. CTs are believed to be followed by individuals who do not understand what is true and false. Individuals with a “crippled epistemology” (Dentith 2016, 575). To this, I respond by asking how one can claim that some theories are just better than others

when it is even ridiculous to think of being able to understand all options fully and compare them? In fact, as explained before, Kuhn has clearly shown that people with different central beliefs are like people who come from different worlds. People might see reality in different ways. If I see the glass half full and you see it half empty, how can I claim that refilling the glass is a bad idea? How can I claim that your understanding of reality is deeply flawed? Simply because, in my opinion, there is enough water in the glass, it does not mean that such an amount of water is enough for you. I might be used to less water in my glass than you. Does this make my opinion and understanding of reality better or worse? Not really. It just makes it different and characterised by non-identical eyes looking at the world. The philosopher Matthew Dentith cleverly explains that: “in a world where 99% of people are faithful to their partners, the idea your partner is cheating on you would be so preposterous that you would require a lot of evidence to even suspect them of such a thing” (Dentith 2016, 585). Hence, it seems clear that the only reason why certain theories seem just better to us, compared to some others (CTs), is because we are used to interpreting the world in that way. Finding alternative theories inaccurate does not necessarily mean that those theories are flawed. It simply means that due to our already present beliefs, we are brought to believe something rather than something else at first sight, and, to change our mind, we will need to delve deeper into the theory that seems less plausible. “None [of us will] say that conspiracy theories are *prima facie* likely” (Dentith 2016, 586), but that is just because we are looking at theories through the eyes of our already present theories.

The academics Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold claim that, at first sight, believing in the epistemic separation between CTs and official theories can appear grounded. In fact, as just shown, when observing alternatives to our beliefs, we will most likely not see the substantial implications of theories different from ours. Hence, we will blindly convince ourselves that such theories are not as truthful as ours, believing ours to be the only truth and the others to be inherently wrong. However, that position starts to collapse as soon as we look into human history and its beliefs. History provides many examples of theories that went from being defined as CTs to being highly regarded official theories. Thus, history shows us that CTs can be plausible descriptions of phenomena as they can become accepted theories with time. Secondly, history proves that official stories do not become official just because of their ability to describe reality but also because of other factors (which will be analysed soon). Otherwise, how could we explain that theories we now judge true were previously strongly untrue?

A famous historical example of a profoundly influential and powerful official theory being substituted by what was initially claimed to be a CT is the example of the Copernican system. In the 15th century, under the Church’s influence, Europe was promoting the almost ever-present belief that the Earth was at the centre of the Universe. The Earth was still, and the Sun was moving. The Bible and our own lives

were the proof of it. This system proved to people why humans were at the centre of the Universe - because they were the image of God, the chosen ones with the possibility to rule everything else on Earth. In the mid-1400, an alternative view was proposed. After observing the sky with his bare eyes, the academic Nicolaus Copernicus claimed the Sun to be the centre of the Universe and the Earth moving around

Support is, therefore, what makes and allows CTs to become official theories.

it. To many, especially the Church, which at the time was the strongest power (hence the closest thing to Coady's official account), that sounded unthinkable, impossible, irrational. It sounded like a CT to take the truth away from people.

After other academics started promoting the Copernican system and the Church lost its absolute influence, the theory gained more and more importance, slowly substituting the Ptolemaic system. If not for influential figures like Galileo Galilei promoting the Copernican system and the Church losing part of its influence, we would probably still believe in the Ptolemaic system (Holland 2019, 315-332) and consider most of our current (true) theories to be false.

The Only Difference

What has been proven until now is the absence of epistemic differences between CTs and official theories. However, if that is actually the case, where does the separation between the two types of understanding derive? Furthermore, does this mean that everything we know is a CT? In fact, if there is no difference between the two types of theories, it appears self-evident that there is no issue in claiming an official theory to be a CT as they differ only on their claims.

Pelkmans and Machold affirm that what distinguishes CTs from official theories is not what they call the "truth-value" (Pelkmans and Machold 2011, 68) - the ability of a theory to tell the truth, but rather the "use-value" (Pelkmans and Machold 2011, 68) held by a theory. Use-value is the manner and extent to which theories are involved in the socio-political sphere. CTs are initially like any other theory, and only after their social potential is understood do they become CTs. "The reason for [a theory to become a conspiracy/official theory] can be found in the political clout that the different theories could attract, and in the ways in which the theories resonated with popular ideas" (Pelkmans and Machold 2011, 74). Following that, it appears clear that CTs and official theories differ in their attractivity and support from powerful figures. Official theories are supported by influential accounts (resembling Coady's claim that the support of official accounts characterises official theories), and CTs are characterised by a lack of prominent figures backing them up. The more official accounts support a theory, the higher the probability of a theory becoming an official theory. The lower the number of influential people standing behind a theory, the lower the likelihood of a theory becoming an official theory. To Pelkmans and Machold (2011), as soon as the support for a CT drastically increases, the theory will cease being a CT

and become an official theory. Similarly, as soon as the support for an official theory fades away, the theory will end up being official. Surprisingly, though, in “Conspiracy Theories and their Truth Trajectories”, it is also shown how an official theory will hardly ever become a CT and will just be labelled “mistaken theory” (Pelkmans and Machold 2011, 75). However, such a phenomenon is not problematic for the purposes of this paper (and, therefore, will not be analysed here) as mistaken theories are still said to have an irrational nature and, accordingly, are no different from what a CT is believed to be, making “CT” and “mistaken theory” two distinguished terms for the same concept (in this scenario).

To summarise, it is evident that what distinguishes CTs from official theories is not the ability of a theory to explain phenomena in the right way but rather the influential accounts supporting (or not) a theory. What follows is that everything we know has the potential to be a CT. The reason for such a claim is that it appears clear that there are no epistemic differences between CTs and official theories. Thus, every CT could substitute an official theory. However, since not all theories can be officially formulated or will ever obtain approval from official accounts, not all theories will ever become official theories. Therefore, as all theories have the epistemic potential to be accepted theories, but only some have official accounts backing them up, it can be claimed that everything we know has the potential (but not certainty) to be a CT.

Just a Potential Conspiracy Theory

In conclusion, it appears that the distinction between CT and official theory is far more precarious and not as strong as we believe it is. Firstly, the definition of CT highlights that the two types of theory only differ in their usage and acceptance within official media rather than on how rationally plausible they actually are. Secondly, due to the impossibility of thoroughly comparing CTs with official theories, it is impossible to claim a theory’s absolute rightness and/or wrongness. Hence, official theories are to be considered as correct and valuable as CTs. Thirdly, showing that CTs can be official theories, consequently proving that truthfulness does not influence a theory being official or a conspiracy. All of this makes the distinction between the “more rational” theories and the “more dangerous” ones not based on their epistemic difference (as it has just been proven to be a non-existing difference). Lastly, a differentiation between CTs and official theories is found. What separates CTs from official ones is the official support the theories receive from deeply influential and powerful accounts, which is lacking in CTs. Support is, therefore, what makes and allows CTs to become official theories (and the other way around), allowing everything we know to be considered no different from a CT. Ultimately, since everything we know might derive from (or will become) a CT, and powerful institutions will not support all theories, everything we know has the potential to be a CT but is not a CT per se.

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Conclusion

Although there are arguments why “intellectuals are entitled to an attitude of *prima facie* scepticism toward the theories propounded by conspiracy theorists” (Clarke 2002, 131), these justifications mostly rely on the assumption that the belief in CTs is based on cognitive, logical errors and are therefore to be belittled. Approaches that differ from that of Brian Keeley (1999) in the way that they do not classify conspiracy theories on epistemic grounds, creating a “subclass” of CTs (Clarke 2002, 131), have been met with significant criticism. Our volume is a call for a more nuanced outlook on CTs. Although we have covered the phenomenon of conspiracy beliefs from various angles, our papers form a cohesive collection in their common aim to challenge the dominant and popular outlook of CTs as (merely) the product of irrationality.

CTs are not new, and neither is the philosophical engagement with the topic. However, as Saar Boter mentions in “Our New Paradigm: The Conspiracy Theory of Society Revisited” (chapter 2), the internet has changed the landscape in which CTs are formed and spread. This does not render the previous philosophical debates useless. Instead, it puts the debate on the definition of CTs into a new context, in which Pigden’s case for a reconsideration of the negative connotation of the term is reinforced. In “Can a Conspiracy Theory be the True Story” (chapter 1), Kyra Appel questions the notion that a CT is necessarily a false theory; in fact, something can be both true and a CT.

After Appel’s and Boter’s papers offer insight into the definition of CTs and their epistemological level, our volume contains various case studies that seek to shed light on CTs from differing angles. The case studies in our volume highlight the fact that there is no universal approach suitable for every CT. The current political climate urges us to consider the many dimensions of the myriad of CTs that one is so easily exposed to in our digital age.

In “Is Conspiracy Against Women in the Workplace Irrational?” (chapter 6) Yeha Jung argues that conspiracies occur in society, namely in the form of sexism against women in the workplace. She argues that it is not the theory about the possibility of a conspiracy that is irrational; it is instead the conspiracy against women itself that is deserving of the label. In “When Dog Whistles Fall on Deaf Ears” (chapter 3), Sam Peelen takes a closer look at the semantic role of dog whistle communication in politics. His analysis, rooted in the philosophy of language, adds a new perspective to our paper. Additionally, his inquiry strengthens the argument that not every theory that hints at conspiracy are necessarily and inherently false or irrational.

Kirsty Crook argues that the supposed irrationality is what makes CTs interesting in “Is the Allure of Conspiracy Theories Based on Their Supposed Irrationality”

(chapter 7). In “Is QAnon the newest Lovecraftian Work?” (chapter 4), Ries Aalders also examines the language of CTs and focuses on the rhetoric of QAnon. Both authors elucidate the allure of CTs.

Digging further into the viral conspiracy of QAnon, Lucas Lievens focuses on similarities between QAnon and the well-known terrorist organisation the Klu Klux Klan in “The Epistemological Similarities and Differences Between The Conspiracy Theory QAnon and The New Religious Movement The KKK” (chapter 5). In investigating the points of difference and likeness between the two, Lievens discusses the distinct motivations of groups that employ CTs in their narrative. Lievens’ paper emphasises the importance of recognising that CT is used as an umbrella term that encompasses many different theories that cannot be easily generalised. Furthermore, Lievens underlines the fact that CTs can be dangerous.

The context in which this volume was established cannot be ignored. Psychologists Van Prooijen & Douglas (2017) point out that times of crisis and societal change have triggered the rise of CTs throughout history. The current circumstances, however, offer a unique perspective. The worldwide spread of COVID-19 and the rapid spread of information across the internet intersect at their origin in globalisation. Policies and political rhetorics vary worldwide, though we seem to be connected more than ever. As we watch the pandemic unfold in real-time, the effects of fake news on the virus, the public, and politics are placed under a magnifying glass. In light of the pandemic, “Harmful Conspiracy Theories - a Small Price to Pay?” (chapter 8) by Laura Schranz offers insight into the societal consequences of CTs. Focusing specifically on the racist rhetoric surrounding COVID-19 in the USA, her paper takes an ethical approach and provides nuance to the effectiveness of theorising CTs academically. Although CTs do have benefits, accounts that treat CTs as beneficial must not lose grip of real-world conditions.

In “COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: Reasons for Emotions in Politics” (chapter 9), Evi Bongers develops a critique of the focus on reason in COVID-19 policies through the work of established philosopher Chantal Mouffe. Bongers argues that the political view of emotions as antithetical to reason can lead to the exclusion of parties that are perceived to be irrational. Taking examples from Dutch policy and politics specifically, she concludes that this view should be reformulated as a preventative measure against CTs that threaten democratic politics. In “How Should Professional Journalism Deal with Conspiracy Theories?” (chapter 10) Nell Meister takes inspiration from Mouffe as well and disentangles the complicated role of professional journalism in dealing with CTs appropriately.

With the variety of case studies, this volume contains, we have shown that a one-sided approach to CTs is not only outdated but does real-world harm because it fails to consider the immense consequences CTs and the surrounding discourse on CTs have on people’s lives. This is only further amplified by the digital age. In the paper “The Logic of Conspiracy Theories: a Mathematical Analysis Of a 9/11 Conspi-

racy Theory” (chapter 11), Nienke Wessel adds a new perspective to our discussion of CTs. Wessel approaches the topic at hand from a perspective of modal logic. She shows that the focus on the perceived irrationality of CTs is misplaced. Elia Rossi comes to a similar conclusion in the final paper, “Is Everything We Know a Conspiracy Theory?”. He points out that the notorious label “irrational” cannot be a defining feature of CTs.

In conclusion, we push for a more nuanced perspective on CTs. The perceived irrationality of CTs is not only questionable but fails to treat CTs as the multifaceted phenomenon that it is. Epistemology, ethics, philosophy of language, political philosophy, analytic philosophy, and philosophy of logic all add to a complete idea of CTs. Although our varying approaches have led to diverse conclusions, there is a consensus on the notion that CTs are worthy of consideration. A focus on the perceived irrationality of CTs may lead to intellectual exclusion and is not only unwarranted but can have far-reaching political and societal consequences. Besides the direct and beneficial effects of a more refined outlook on CTs, the study of conspiratorial beliefs is an interesting basis for epistemological questions on the nature of knowledge, (ir)rationality and certainty.

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