Steve Clarke

Conspiracy Theories and the Internet: Controlled Demolition and Arrested Development

ABSTRACT

Following Clarke (2002), a Lakatosian approach is used to account for the epistemic development of conspiracy theories. It is then argued that the hyper-critical atmosphere of the internet has slowed down the development of conspiracy theories, discouraging conspiracy theorists from articulating explicit versions of their favoured theories, which could form the hard core of Lakatosian research programmes. The argument is illustrated with a study of the "controlled demolition" theory of the collapse of three towers at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

1. INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH PROGRAMMES

In Clarke (2002) I advocated a Lakatosian approach to the assessment of the epistemic merits of conspiracy theories. Following Lakatos (1970), I argued that the way we ought to decide whether to continue to adhere to a conspiracy theory, or to abandon it, is by considering whether it is at the core of a "progressive research programme" or a "degenerating research programme". A research programme is a research tradition that is developed around a "hard core" of explicit theoretical commitments. Its proponents advance the case for the hard core by modifying the "protective belt" – which contains initial conditions and auxiliary hypotheses – in light of new evidence. In a progressive research programme the proponents of a theory are able to anticipate new evidence and make predictions (and retrodictions) that are generally successful. By contrast, a degenerating research programme is characterised by a lack of successful predictions (and retrodictions) and by the subsequent modification of initial conditions and auxiliary hypotheses after new evidence has come in.

Once a theory has become sufficiently degenerate, it is irrational to continue to hold on to it, rather than abandon it for a progressive research programme that also explains the same phenomena. Lakatos (1970) did not say exactly when this was, and it is doubtful whether we could stipulate an exact point at which it becomes rational to abandon any particular theory. Nevertheless there are clear cases where a theory has been held onto way beyond the point at which it should have been abandoned. The appeal to explicitly rational criteria in the comparison and selection of theories is the key difference between Lakatos's (1970) approach to the development of theories and Kuhn's (1962) influential relativistic account.[1] Lakatos explicitly articulated his account of theoretical development as an alternative to Kuhn's account (Lakatos 1970, 4).

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Many conspiracy theories should be judged to be at the core of degenerating research programmes because they seem to imply predictions that are not successful. If Elvis Presley really had faked his own death in 1977 as Gail Brewer-Giorgio (1988) and others have alleged, then we could reasonably predict that reliable evidence of his whereabouts and of his various subsequent activities would have been forthcoming at some point in the past three decades. Furthermore, we could reasonably expect to see evidence of unusual behaviour, related to the faked deaths amongst alleged co-conspirators, including his close relatives (Clarke 2002, 137). But no such reliable evidence has been forthcoming.

An example of a conspiracy theory that is at the core of a progressive research programme is the theory that explains the events of September 11, 2001 by appealing to the conspiratorial activities of Al Qaeda. Since September 11, 2001 evidence has been presented by the US Department of Defence that directly implicates members of the Al Qaeda organisation in the attacks[2] and Al Jazeera has aired video footage of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden implying that Al Qaeda was responsible for the attacks.[3] Furthermore, Al Qaeda members have behaved in a manner consistent with the behaviour of an organisation that seeks to damage US interests. All of this evidence is to be expected, if the explanation of the events of September 11, 2001 that appeals to the activity of Al Qaeda is true, so the research programme with this theory at its core is a progressive research programme.[4]

Given evidence of sufficient progress, research programmes will typically gain widespread acceptance. Because they are at the core of progressive research programmes, some conspiracy theories, including the "Al Qaeda theory" and Bernstein and Woodward's (1974) "Watergate theory", have gained general acceptance and have become "received views" or "official explanations". It can seem odd to continue to refer to these widely accepted theories as conspiracy theories, especially when, as in the case of the Al Qaeda theory, they are opposed by prominent conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, these are theories which involve secret plans and by the lights of widely accepted definitions of conspiracy theories, such as the definitions due to Pigden (1995, 5) and Keeley (1999, 116), they therefore count as conspiracy theories.[5]

David Coady (2003) offers a different definition of conspiracy theories that would rule out these examples as counting as instances of genuine conspiracy theories. His definition of conspiracy theories includes the clause that "... the proposed explanation must conflict with an 'official' explanation of the same historical event" (Coady 2003, 198). Given this stipulation, the examples that I have provided would not count as conspiracy theories, so they would not count as examples of progressive conspiracy theories. But even if we were to accept this clause as a part of a definition of conspiracy theories, it is still possible for there to be conspiracy theories that are at the heart of progressive research programmes. This is possible when those theories are not accepted as official explanations. The Watergate conspiracy theory fell into this category before it became an official theory.

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2. THE INTERNET

I've previously argued that the main problem with many conspiracy theorists is that they have a tendency to continue to believe in conspiracy theories that are at the core of degenerating research programmes, when those programmes have degenerated past the point where the majority of people would rationally decide to abandon belief in a theory (Clarke 2002). This problem comes in degrees. Some conspiracy theorists require a bit more evidence of degeneration than is normally required before they will give up belief in a favoured conspiracy theory, some require a lot more evidence and some will never give up on their favourite conspiracy theory, regardless of the degree of degeneration of the associated research programme. I appealed to findings in psychology to explain this phenomenon (Clarke 2002, 2006).

Conspiracy theorising does not occur in a social vacuum and it seems that a comprehensive account of what is wrong with much ordinary conspiracy theorising will have to include a sociological analysis of the conditions for conspiracy theorising. Although individuals may generate their own conspiracy theories and may choose to keep these to themselves, the construction of the vast majority of conspiracy theories is a social enterprise – particularly nowadays, given the widespread use of the internet – with different people transmitting different versions of conspiracy theories to one another, adding to these and revising them in the face of new evidence and in the face of challenges from rival theories.

Significant changes in social and material circumstances can have an effect on the quantity and quality of the conspiracy theories that are advocated. I will argue that the development and widespread use of the internet, which has had significant social effects, has also had a profound effect on the development of conspiracy theories. It is commonly held that conspiracy theories have flourished on the internet (Morello 2004). However, I will argue that although the internet has enabled the dissemination of many more conspiracy theories than there once were, the internet has not been an unqualified boon to conspiracy theorists. I will argue that the internet has actually retarded the development of many conspiracy theories.

One obvious result of having widespread access to the internet is that many more people can communicate with many more people and can do so much faster than they could before. These changes in the nature of information transmission that result from widespread use of the internet are particularly important for conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories have long had a populist appeal (Hofstadter 1971). Intellectuals have mostly eschewed conspiracy theorising and have often dismissed the efforts of those who promote conspiracy theories (Clarke 2002, Coady 2003), so conspiracy theorists have long been accustomed to utilising channels of communication outside of government and mainstream academia. Unsurprisingly, conspiracy theorists have been quick to take to the internet, where there has been a flourishing of discussion of conspiracy theories and the sharing of evidence about conspiracy theories.[6]

There is a vast amount of information that is available on the internet at the click of a mouse. However, people have much difficulty assessing the reliability of much

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of this information. There are calls to establish conventions regarding the reliability of information on the internet (Kunst et al. 2002, Vedder and Wachbroit 2003) and there seems to be no in principle reason why such conventions could not be established and why these could not achieve general acceptance. So the difficulty of assessing the reliability of information on the internet may only be a short term phenomenon. For now, however, the difficulty of assessing the reliability of the information that is available on the internet has undermined (at least temporarily) some of the traditional epistemic advantages which proponents of received views – traditional opponents of most conspiracy theories – have enjoyed, or at least it has done so in the realm of cyberspace.

It might be thought that, by enabling the rapid sharing of information, the internet has led to the speeding up of the processes by which conspiracy theories develop, either as the cores of progressive or degenerating research programmes. So it might seem that the internet has aided conspiracy theorising by accelerating the rate at which conspiracy theories degenerate or progress. However, there are two reasons to think that this is not the case and that the internet may actually serve to slow down the development of conspiracy theories. The first, which has already been mentioned, is that it is currently very difficult to assess the reliability of information that is available on the internet. If we cannot agree on the facts that are to be accounted for then it is difficult to agree about whether a research programme is progressing or degenerating. The second is that there is reason to suppose that the high level of critical discussion on the internet may create an atmosphere that is not conducive to the construction of theories that are stated explicitly enough to function as the core of either a progressive or a degenerative research programme. If this is right then the internet can delay the development of conspiracy theories by delaying the development of the research programmes that they are embedded in.

How explicit does a theory have to be to function as the core of a research programme? It has to be explicit enough that it becomes clear when alterations of initial conditions and auxiliary hypotheses in the protective belt will actually function to protect the hard core. A particular conspiracy theory needs at least to involve the identification of a specific conspiratorial group and to involve the specification at least one motive to explain that group's conspiratorial activities before the research programme formed around that theory can be assessed as progressive or degenerative. Without at least this much information, proponents of conspiracy theories are unable to know where to look for confirmatory evidence and are unable to know how to modify the protective belt to protect their favoured theory from apparent disconfirmation. I will argue that modern conspiracy theories on the internet can and sometimes do suffer from a lack of specification, to such a degree that their proponents fail to identify a specific conspiratorial group, with a specific motive, in their favoured theory, and fail to do so for long periods of time.

To understand how this astonishing omission is possible we need to understand more about the nature of conspiracy theorising. Conspiracy theorists are typically engaged in two sorts of activities. First, they try to develop theories explaining

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

observed phenomena that involve one or more conspiracies. Second, they look for anomalies that are not explained by a received view which their theory competes with. So, those who argue that Elvis Presley faked his own death try to explain how he could have accomplished this act and try to explain why the view that he died of natural causes – the received view – is not, despite initial appearances, consistent with observed phenomena. Oftentimes a conspiracy theory involves the postulation of a cover story, which is designed to prevent people generally finding out about the true nature of the conspiracy in question. In these cases the received view is understood by conspiracy theorists to function as a cover story, publicly supported by those who are committing the conspiracy, with the intention of preventing the general public from realising the true nature of their plans. Death by natural causes counts as a cover story for those who believe that Elvis Presley faked his own death, if they also believe that he deliberately tried to make it appear that his death was a result of natural causes (rather than murder, manslaughter, suicide, etc.).

Conspiracy theories can develop in a variety of ways, but typically they start in one way. A conspiracy theorist typically begins by identifying anomalies in a received view. This motivates further investigation, which can lead to the discovery of further anomalies and may prompt the suspicion that the received view is a cover story that has been promoted by a group of conspirators, in order to prevent the general public from finding out the truth. The last step in this developmental sequence is that an alternative explanation is postulated. It is only when an alternative explanatory theory has been postulated that we are in a position to begin assessing whether that alternative explanatory theory is at the core of a progressive or a degenerating research programme.

It is easy for conspiracy theorists operating on the internet to become caught up in rapidly developing debates about anomalies in a well-known received view that is being challenged by other conspiracy theorists. When this happens conspiracy theorists can become bogged down in the business of challenging a received view and may end up taking longer to articulate a clear alternative. Additionally, they may be reluctant to articulate a clear alternative and state it publicly on the internet, when they have reason to believe that in doing so they will be inviting criticism from all corners. Opponents of conspiracy theories are very active on the internet and offer instant criticism of new conspiracy theories and new variants of older conspiracy theories. And not only are conspiracy theories subject to instant attack from anti-conspiracy theorists; they are also subject to instant attack from other conspiracy theorists who advocate rival theories attempting to explain the same phenomena.

In the next section of the paper I will examine a case study in which a conspiracy theory has been debated by many in a highly public manner for five years. However, the leading proponents of this conspiracy theory do not yet appear to have articulated a clear alternative to the received view. Not coincidentally, proponents of this conspiracy theory have encountered significant opposition on the internet. This is the case of the "controlled demolition" theory of the collapse of three buildings in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. CONTROLLED DEMOLITION

According to advocates of the controlled demolition theory, three buildings in the World Trade Center, WTC 1, WTC 2 and WTC 7, were prepared by demolition experts to collapse in a controlled manner on September 11, 2001. Like most conspiracy theories, the controlled demolition theory is in competition with a received view,[7] which is a component of the Al Qaeda theory. It is the view that operatives of Al Qaeda hijacked two planes and flew these into the two largest towers in the World Trade Center. On this view, also a conspiracy theory, the ensuing fires caused steel beams and girders to buckle within WTC 1 and WTC 2, leading to their collapse as well as the collapse of WTC 7, which was nearby. Advocates of the controlled demolition theory do not deny that the planes were flown into WTC 1 and WTC 2. However, they deny that these events were causally relevant to the three collapses.

Questions about the credibility of the received view began to be raised in late 2001.[8] The following year Eric Hufschmid published his *Painful Questions* (Hufschmid 2002), in which the controlled demolition theory is explicitly advocated. Since then the controlled demolition theory has been much discussed. Its two most prominent contemporary advocates on the internet are David Ray Griffin (2005), a theologian and postmodern philosopher, and Steven E. Jones, (2006, 2007) a physicist who is also co-editor of the *Journal of 9/11 Studies*, an online journal devoted to questioning the received view of the events of September 11, 2001 and developing explanatory alternatives.[9] The controlled demolition theory is one of a number of conspiracy theories put forward to explain some or all of the complicated events of September 11, 2001. Griffin has also presented a flurry of arguments regarding the interpretation of the events of September 11, 2001 (Griffin 2004, 2006, 2007, Griffin and Falk 2004) along with general criticisms of the policies of the Bush Government and discussion of the political responsibilities of committed Christians. It is also worth mentioning *Loose Change*, a widely viewed independent internet based documentary that reprises the case for the controlled demolition theory as well as cases for other conspiracy theories regarding the events of September 11, 2001 that took place in Washington and Pennsylvania.[10]

There are also many sources available on the internet where the received view is defended and the controlled demolition theory is attacked. These include the *Journal of Debunking 9/11 Conspiracy Theories*,[11] The *National Institute of Standards and Technology* (2006) "Federal Building and Fire Safety Investigation of the World Trade Center Disaster Answers to Frequently Asked Questions", an influential article in *Popular Mechanics*, available online,[12] and *Screw Loose Change*, a counter-documentary and associated blog devoted to criticisms of the documentary *Loose Change*.[13] Online debate between proponents and opponents of the controlled demolition theory is intense and extremely polemical.

Griffin (2005) argues that the fires which were caused by the crashing of two planes into the two main towers in the World Trade Center could not have been hot enough to cause steel framed buildings to collapse. He also argues that the way in which the

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

buildings rapidly collapsed was inconsistent with fire damage. However, he argues, it is consistent with controlled demolition. According to him, "the collapses of the Twin Towers manifest at least 11 characteristic features of controlled demolitions" (Griffin 2005, Section 3). Jones (2006) offers a similar argument.[14]

Much of the discussion in Griffin (2005) and Jones (2006) is concerned with criticisms of the received view, particularly in regard to received claims about the heat of the fires in the World Trade Center buildings which collapsed, and the consistency of eyewitness reports of events that took place shortly before and during the collapses with the received view. Griffin (2005) marshals evidence from an impressive array of sources in support of his criticisms.[15] By contrast, little is said about the details of the positive theory. Griffin (2005) makes two substantial claims regarding the positive theory. First, that the conspiracy was perpetrated by "domestic terrorists". He provides two reasons for thinking that these were domestic rather than foreign terrorists. He asserts that foreign terrorists could not have gotten access to the building to plant the necessary explosives. Also, he argues that foreign terrorists would be highly unlikely to go to the effort of creating a *controlled* demolition (Griffin 2005, Section 6). If the collapse of the World Trade Center was a controlled demolition then it seems that whoever did orchestrate the event had an interest in creating a certain amount of damage and killing a certain number of people, but did not have an interest in causing more damage and killing even more people, which would have been the result of an uncontrolled demolition of an equivalent size and which would have been the result if less time had elapsed between the impact of the planes and the actual collapses.

Griffin's second substantial claim is that the controlled demolition, together with the cover-up needed to ensure that it did not become publicly known, could only have taken place with the assistance of forces within the US government (Griffin 2005, Section 6). Jones (2006, 2007) is more coy than Griffin (2005), declining to speculate about the identity and motives of the alleged perpetrators of the controlled demolition. Instead he calls for the formation of "a truly independent cross-disciplinary, international panel" which will have access to "all relevant data" (2006, 43). The committee he envisages will be asked to consider the controlled demolition hypothesis along with other explanatory alternatives.[16]

Although Griffin's (2005) positive core claims in his version of the controlled demolition theory are minimal (and Jones' (2006, 2007) non-existent) the broader theory that they are implicitly committed to appears to be quite baroque. The controlled demolition theory involves an unnamed nefarious organisation which was able to organise for three very large buildings to be pre-wired for demolition, apparently without any of the thousands of office workers who worked in those buildings thinking it worth mentioning to others that unusual events were occurring in their places of work. Such preparations would take a long time and would typically involve obvious evidence of suspicious activity, such as the partial removal of interior walls on all blast floors (Blanchard 2006).[17]

The controlled demolition theory involves the hijacking of planes which were flown into the buildings – presumably so as to encourage belief in a 'cover story' involving

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

foreign terrorists. Furthermore, it involves the precise coordination of these events. Charges would have had to be prepared in such a way that the collapse was observed to commence at roughly the place on the buildings where the two planes impacted with them. So, the rough height of the impacts would have to have been prearranged (Jones 2006), a detail of the theory that involves the further assumption that highly skilled pilots were involved (Partridge 2006). The theory also appears to involve the difficult-to-believe claim that the pre-set blast charges in WTC 1 and WTC 2 could have survived the impact of the planes and the subsequent fires, which burned on the floors near the points of impact, for 102 minutes and 56 minutes respectively, prior to collapse.[18]

It appears that we can make several inferences about Griffin's "domestic terrorists", who are alleged to have conducted the controlled demolition. First, we can infer that they are not the sort of group that wished to draw attention to themselves, by claiming credit for the attack. Second, that they hold a curiously ambivalent attitude towards the employees and occupants of the World Trade Center. They did not wish to minimise the loss of lives of innocent civilians; after all they managed to cause the death of almost 3000. However, they are not the sort of organisation that wished to kill indiscriminately either, as it seems that they could easily have killed many more. If there is such an organisation, then it is surely a very powerful and extremely efficient organisation. Not only has it managed to coordinate an extraordinarily complicated conspiracy, but it appears to have managed to prevent information about the event from being leaked by the various demolition experts, accomplices of hijackers and others who must have been involved in the conspiracy. Lastly, it appears that the conspirators are either only interested in conducting a single major terrorist act or are very patient and are prepared to wait for long periods of time before striking again. An organisation of such power and competence could surely have conducted further terrorist attacks on a similar scale, but it appears that it has had no desire to conduct any such operations in the last six years.

4. GETTING CONSPIRACY THEORIES OFF THE GROUND

There are various predictions that could be made on the basis of a somewhat more fleshed out controlled demolition theory. If Griffin, Jones, or some other proponent of the controlled demolition theory were to postulate particular orchestrators of the events of September 11, 2001 in New York, and postulate motives for them, then we would be well placed to make a number of rough and ready predictions. We might well be able to predict when and where the organisation can be expected to conduct follow up operations and we might well be able to better understand what sort of operations these are likely to be. We might also be able to get a better sense of why the demolition experts, who are alleged to have set the charges, were motivated to cooperate in the conspiracy and be able to determine if any of these are likely to 'break ranks' and confess to their involvement. We might also have reason to expect similar confessions from accomplices of the hijackers of the planes that struck the two main

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

towers, who must have known something of the overall conspiracy, in order to know which parts of the buildings to fly into. However, because the major proponents of the controlled demolition theory have not provided a working hypothesis about the conspirators they postulate to explain the events of September 11, 2001 in New York, we are not in a position to make even rough and ready predictions. This is unfortunate because the theory cannot be characterised as being at the core of a progressive research programme without such predictions. Having said all this, I do not wish to deny that Griffin (2005) and Jones (2006, 2007) are inching their ways toward some sort of working hypothesis. Both authors appear to see at least parts of the current US Government as being somehow involved in the conspiracy. However, their occasional suggestive remarks do not constitute anything remotely like a working hypothesis and are compatible with a vast range of specific conspiracy theories.

We cannot yet say that the controlled demolition theory is at the core of a degenerative or a progressive research program, because we do not have a well specified set of core theoretical commitments that constitute the controlled demolition theory. What we have is a proto-theory. A commitment to the existence of a conspiratorial organisation, or interest group, along with a motive for carrying out a controlled demolition of the World Trade Center are necessary before we can be said to have a well specified set of core theoretical commitments for a controlled demolition theory. Once we have such a theory we will be in a position to decide whether it is progressive or degenerative. It is hard to believe that it will not be degenerative in at least one way, which is that it will be exceedingly difficult to square the theory with the apparent failure of any of the thousands of people working in the World Trade Center, or who visited the World Trade Center in the weeks before September 11, 2001, to come forward and report evidence of strange events that could be seen as evidence of preparations for a demolition.[19] However, it is possible that a specific version of the controlled demolition theory will successfully address this problem and it is possible that a specific version of the controlled demolition theory will be progressive in other ways.

By contrast with the controlled demolition theory, the Al Qaeda theory is quite clearly specified. The names of key members of the organisation are specified along with their immediate objective, in the theory, which is to resist Western political and military influence in the Islamic world. The World Trade Center was a symbol of US power and it is plausible to think that members of Al Qaeda see US foreign policy as the chief source of Western political influence in the Islamic world, so the attack on the World Trade Center is explicable on the Al Qaeda theory. I've characterised this theory as being at the core of a progressive research programme. Some might disagree with me about this, but it would be hard to disagree with the claim that it is at the core of a well-articulated research programme.[20]

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

5. CONCLUSION

Has the internet changed conspiracy theories? To answer this question definitively would require a much more exhaustive study than the one that has been conducted here. But on the basis of what has been considered here it seems plausible to think that it has, and has done so by retarding the development of conspiracy theories. The case of the controlled demolition theory appears to be a striking example of arrested theoretical development. Despite voluminous discussion, over five years, the principal advocates of the theory have yet to present even one specific version of the theory. In stark contrast, most of the conspiracy theories developed before the widespread use of the internet, included reasonably well specified versions, which appeared relatively quickly. For example, the view that the death of Elvis Presley was faked, by Elvis himself, along with other conspirators, to enable him to lead a quiet life was articulated within two years of his death.[21] Indeed, a problem with some older conspiracy theories was that there were very many well specified versions available. Take, for example, the assassination of J. F. Kennedy. This has been alleged to have been orchestrated by the CIA, the FBI, the KGB, the Mafia, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, Fidel Castro, Cuban exile groups, the US military and some combinations of the above.[22] All of these are specific groups or individuals, with particular motives, unlike the nebulous 'domestic terrorists' that Griffin (2005) blames for the World Trade Center collapses.

The internet has aided in the dissemination of the controlled demolition theory, but it also appears to have retarded its development. It seems plausible to think that advocates of the theory have failed to develop specific versions of the theory because they are keen to avoid the criticisms that they know that they would attract were they to commit to a specific version of the theory. As we have seen, there are many defenders of the received view, active on the internet, who are ready to attack advocates of the controlled demolition theory. And these advocates would be much more vulnerable to attack were they to commit to a specific variant of the theory. Advocates of the controlled demolition theory also attract criticism from proponents of rival conspiracy theories as well as from other advocates of the controlled demolition theory. They could reasonably expect more of this sort of criticism if they were to commit themselves to a specific version of the theory.[23]

Conspiracy theories are typically theories that are pitched against a dominant received view. It may be that these are best developed initially in the absence of direct competition with the received view. Indeed, this was the typical pattern of development of a conspiracy theory, before the advent of widespread use of the internet. A theory would be developed by an individual or a small group, who were cut off from the mainstream media. It was typically only when these conspiracy theorists had a relatively well fleshed out conspiracy theory, which was developed enough to deflect obvious criticisms, that they would seek to publicise this widely, principally through the publication of books that outlined the relevant theory in detail.[24]

In the era of the internet, conspiracy theories, such as the controlled demolition theory are developed in the glare of worldwide publicity. Advocates of conspiracy

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theories on the internet have been reluctant to advance positive theories. It seems that this is because they fear being criticised by any of the billions of people who have access to the internet, a significant minority of whom are happy to devote their energies to attacking conspiracy theories discussed on the internet. So instead they concentrate their efforts on criticising the received view. As long as there are ways in which the received view is less than perfect, this activity can proceed and internet conspiracy theorists can remain active. However, in and of itself this activity cannot be sufficient to overthrow a received view in favour of a conspiracy theory. The most it can do is cause people to suspend judgement. Before we can reasonably expect a conspiracy theory to replace a received view, that conspiracy theory must be judged to provide a superior explanation of the relevant phenomena than the received view. But this cannot happen unless the conspiracy theory in question is fleshed out to the extent that it is in a position to figure in specific explanations of the events in question.[25]

REFERENCES

Asquith, Christina. 2006. "Who Really Blew Up the Twin Towers?" *The Guardian*, 5 September. Retrieved August 6, 2007, from http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/worldwide/story/0,,1864657,00.html

Bažant, Zdeněk and Mathieu Verdure. 2007. "Mechanics of Progressive Collapse: Learning from World Trade Center & Building Demolitions." *Journal of Engineering Mechanics* 133(3): 308–19.

Bernstein, Carl and Bob Woodward. 1974. *All the President's Men*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Bird, Alexander. 2001. *Thomas Kuhn*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Blanchard, Brent. 2006. "A Critical Analysis of The Collapse of WTC Towers 1, 2 & 7 From an Explosives and Conventional Demolition Industry Viewpoint." *Journal of Debunking 9/11 Conspiracy Theories* 1(2): 1–11.

Brewer-Giorgio, Gail. 1988. *Is Elvis Alive?* New York: Tudor.

Clarke, Steve. 2002. "Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32: 131–50.

Clarke, Steve. 2006. "Appealing to the Fundamental Attribution Error: Was it All a Big Mistake?" In D. Coady (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories: the Philosophical Debate*, pp. 135–40. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Coady, David. 2003. "Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories." *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17: 197–209.

Cornish, Kimberley. 1997. *The Jew of Linz – Wittgenstein, Hitler and their Secret Battle for the Mind*. London: Random House.

Dunbar, David and Brad Reagan. (eds.) 2006. *Debunking 9/11 Myths: Why Conspiracy Theories Can't Stand Up to the Facts*. New York: Hearst.

Goodman, Amy. 2004. "The New Pearl Harbor: A Debate On A New Book That Alleges The Bush Administration Was Behind The 9/11 Attacks." *Democracy Now*, 26 May. Retrieved August 6, 2007, from http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=04/05/26/150221.

Griffin, David Ray. 2004. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions*. Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press.

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Griffin, David Ray. 2005. "*The Destruction of the World Trade Center: Why the Official Account Cannot Be True, Authorised Version (with references and notes)*." Retrieved August 6, 2007, from http://www.911review.com/articles/griffin/nyc1.html

Griffin, David Ray. 2006. *Christian Faith and the Truth Behind 9/11: A Call to Reflection and Action*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Griffin, David Ray. 2007. *Debunking 9/11 Debunking: An Answer to Popular Mechanics and Other Defenders of the Official Conspiracy Theory*. Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press.

Griffin, David Ray and Richard Falk. 2004. *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions About the Bush Administration and 9/11*. Northampton, MA: Interlink.

Hofstadter, Richard. 1971. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Hufschmid, Eric. 2002. "*Painful Questions*." Endpoint Software. Retrieved August 6, 2007, from http://www.erichufschmid.net/PainfulQuestionsBook.html

Jones, Steven E. 2006. "Why Indeed Did the WTC Buildings Completely Collapse?" *Journal of 9/11 Studies* 3: 1–47.

Jones, Steven E. 2007. "Revisiting 9/11/2001 – Applying the Scientific Method." *Journal of 9/11 Studies* 11: 55–81.

Keeley, Brian. 1999. "Of Conspiracy Theories." *The Journal of Philosophy* 96: 109–26.

Kuhn, Thomas. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kunst, Heinke, Diederik Groot, Pallavi Latthe, Manish Latthe, and Khalid Khan. 2002. "Accuracy of Information on Apparently Credible Websites: Survey of Five Common Health Topics." *British Medical Journal* 32: 581–2.

Lakatos, Imre. 1970. "Falsification and the Methodology of Research Programmes." In I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, pp. 91–195. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lane, Mark. 1966. *Rush to Judgement: A Critique of the Warren Commission's Inquiry into the Murders of John F. Kennedy, Officer J.D. Tippit and Lee Harvey Oswald*. Austin, TX: Holt Rhinehart.

McMichael, J. 2001. "Muslims Suspend Laws of Physics!" *Public Action News Service.* October 21, Revised November 25, 2001. Retrieved August 6, 2007, from http://www.public-action.com/911/jmcm/physics_1.html

Morello, Carol. 2004. "Conspiracy Theories Flourish on the Internet." *The Washington Post*, October 7th, p. B01. Retrieved August 6, 2007, from http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A13059–2004Oct6?language=printer.

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States. 2004. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Retrieved August 6, 2007, from http://www.9–11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf.

National Institute of Standards and Technology. 2006. "Federal Building and Fire Safety Investigation of the World Trade Center Disaster, Frequently Asked Questions." Retrieved August 6, 2007, from http://wtc.nist.gov/pubs/factsheets/faqs_8_2006.htm

Partridge, Ernest. 2006. "The 9/11 Conspiracy: a Skeptic's View." *The Crisis Papers*. April 27. Retrieved August 6, 2007, from http://www.commondreams.org/views06/0427–29.htm.

Pigden, Charles. 1995. "Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 25: 3–34.

Vedder, Anton and Robert Wachbroit. 2003. "Reliability of Information on the Internet:

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Some Distinctions." *Ethics and Information Technology* 5: 211–15.

Walch, Tad. 2006. "Controversy Dogs Y.'s Jones". Utah News. 9 September. Retrieved August 6, 2007, from http://deseretnews.com/dn/view/0,1249,645200098,00.html

NOTES

1 Kuhn is not always interpreted as a relativist. For more on the interpretation of Kuhn see Bird (2001).

2 See, for example: http://www.defenselink.mil/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=3184. Retrieved August 6, 2007.

3 See http://english.aljazeera.net/English/archive/archive?ArchiveId=7382. Retrieved August 6, 2007.

4 Opponents of the Al Qaeda theory sometimes challenge the quality of this evidence and raise additional problems for the Al Qaeda theory. I do not mean to imply that this evidence is unchallengeable or that the theory is without any problems.

5 According to Pigden a conspiracy is, "... a secret plan on the part of a group to influence events partly by covert action" (1995, 5). According to Keeley 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" (1999, 116).

6 Many of the conspiracy theories discussed on the internet are listed on the websites CTRL: The Conspiracy Theory Research List: http://www.ctrl.org/graphicHome/CTRLhome.html and Abovetopsecret.com: http://www.abovetopsecret.com/.

7 For the received view see The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States (2004) as well as Dunbar and Reagan (2006) and Bažant and Verdure (2007).

8 For example, see McMichael (2001).

9 See http://www.journalof911studies.com/.

10 See http://www.loosechange911.com/. A version of Loose Change is being developed for a theatrical release.

11 See http://www.jod911.com/.

12 See http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/military_law/1227842.html.

13 See http://screwloosechange.blogspot.com/.

14 The similarity of these collapses to typical controlled demolitions is disputed on several grounds by Blanchard (2006).

15 However, some of these sources, such as Thomas W. Eagar, have attempted to distance themselves from the controlled demolition theory (Walch 2006). Also, Griffin has been criticised for the paucity of support by structural engineers for his views (Goodman 2004).

16 Jones has been somewhat more forthcoming in a recent media interview, describing the collapse of the three buildings in the World Trade Center as an 'inside job' (Asquith 2006).

17 Jones calculates that 590kg of explosives, "...pre-positioned by a small team of operatives...", would be required to be pre-set in both WTC 1 and WTC 2 as well as 260kg in WTC 7 (2006, 30).

18 Blanchard, a demolition industry expert, describes this claim as 'scientifically impossible' (2006, 4).

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

19 Griffin (2005) and Jones (2006, 2007) present no evidence of such preparations. *Loose Change* (version 2) purports to identify two pieces of indirect evidence. One is evidence of some brief evacuations of the buildings during fire drills. A second is evidence that relates to the use of bomb sniffing dogs in the buildings (according to *Screw Loose Change* this was due to an earlier bomb threat). Compared to what we would expect to see if large buildings were being prepared for demolition, this indirect evidence seems completely insubstantial.

20 On some versions of the Al Qaeda theory, Al Qaeda also has a long term objective of establishing a unified Islamic Caliphate in the Muslim world. See http://fas.org/irp/world/para/ladin.htm and http://www.infoplease.com/spot/al-qaeda-terrorism.html. Both retrieved August 6, 2007. On other versions Al Qaeda is primarily concerned to oppose Western military and political influence in the Muslim world and the goal of establishment of an Islamic caliphate is a Western obsession which is of little or no actual importance to Al Qaeda's leadership. See, for example http://www.tompaine.com/articles/2006/02/13/the_caliphate_myth.php and http://www.consortiumnews.com/2006/100306.html. Both retrieved September 17, 2007.

21 By the country music singer Merle Haggard, according to this source: http://www.classicbands.com/MysteryofElvisPresley.html. Retrieved August 6, 2007.

22 See, for example, http://www.stayfreemagazine.org/4/jfk.htm. Retrieved September 17, 2007.

23 Hufschmid accuses other proponents of the controlled demolition theory of putting forward inferior variants of the controlled demolition theory in order to distract peoples' attention from his own more plausible variant. His own variant is no more specific than those of Griffin (2006), Jones (2006) and *Loose Change*. It differs from the others in that it includes the vague claim that Israel was somehow involved in the conspiracy to cause a controlled demolition. See http://www.erichufschmid.net/Avery-Rowe-Bermas-Hufschmid-phone call.html. Retrieved August 6, 2007.

24 For example, see Brewer-Giorgio (1988), Cornish (1997), Lane (1966).

25 Thanks to S. Matthew Liao, Mark Sheehan and David Coady for helpful comments.

Steve Clarke is a James Martin Research Fellow in the Program on the Ethics of the New Biosciences, James Martin 21st Century School, University of Oxford and Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, Charles Sturt University. His most recent book is *Informed Consent and Clinician Accountability: the Ethics of Report Cards on Surgeon Performance*, edited by Steve Clarke and Justin Oakley, 2007, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.167 Published online by Cambridge University Press