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Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational?

ABSTRACT

It is widely believed that to be a conspiracy theorist is to suffer from a form of irrationality. After considering the merits and defects of a variety of accounts of what it is to be a conspiracy theorist, I draw three conclusions. One, on the best definitions of what it is to be a conspiracy theorist, conspiracy theorists do not deserve their reputation for irrationality. Two, there may be occasions on which we should settle for an inferior definition which entails that conspiracy theorists are after all irrational. Three, if and when we do this, we should recognise that conspiracy theorists so understood are at one end of a spectrum, and the really worrying form of irrationality is at the other end.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theorists are generally assumed to be irrational. This assumption is so deeply entrenched in our culture that when people learn that I defend conspiracy theorists against a variety of criticisms, they often assume that I am *eo ipso* defending irrationality. I am not. Neither of course am I denying that there are irrational conspiracy theorists. So what exactly is my position? Perhaps the best way to begin clarifying it is by comparing it to the position of another defender of conspiracy theorists, Charles Pigden.

As we shall see, Pigden's position does follow from his definition of "conspiracy theorist". So, our differences are *merely* semantic. Nonetheless they do matter, because they have implications for substantive political matters. Pigden defines a conspiracy theorist as "someone who subscribes to a conspiracy theory", and he defines a conspiracy theory as "a theory which posits a conspiracy" (Pigden 2006, 157).[1] Given these definitions, Pigden's defence of conspiracy theorists, lightly paraphrased, goes like this:

> Premise 1: Unless you believe that the reports of history books and the nightly news are largely false, you are a conspiracy theorist.
> Premise 2: If you do believe that the reports of history books and the nightly news are largely false, you are a conspiracy theorist.
> Conclusion: You are a conspiracy theorist.

The validity of this argument is a matter of simple propositional logic. What is the status of its premises? Pigden establishes the first premise by citing numerous reports

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of conspiracies from history books and the media. To believe any of these reports is to subscribe to a conspiracy theory, and hence to be a conspiracy theorist. But to disbelieve all of these reports is also to be a conspiracy theorist, since only conspiracy could explain such widespread and apparently systematic falsehood, and again you are a conspiracy theorist.

The only way you could avoid the conclusion that you are a conspiracy theorist, on Pigden's definition, would be by being almost completely ignorant of what history books and the media say. Hence, Pigden concludes that every "historically and politically literate person is a conspiracy theorist" (2006, 157). If this were so, there would clearly be nothing wrong with being a conspiracy theorist. Indeed, if this were so, the expression "conspiracy theorist" should, if anything, have positive connotations.[2]

Pigden's definition leads to a dramatic conclusion, but he could have gone even further. It not only entails that every historically and politically literate person is a conspiracy theorist, but also that (almost) everyone else is. His definition entails that just believing that someone once conspired to do something is enough to qualify you as a conspiracy theorist, and if that's all it takes, it's hard to see how anyone could fail to be a conspiracy theorist. After all, evidence of conspiracy is not confined to history books and the nightly news; it is also a common feature of most people's personal experience. Almost everyone conspires at one time or another (think of surprise birthday parties) and, if they are sufficiently self-aware to notice this, then they are conspiracy theorists, on Pigden's definition. Even people who never conspire themselves (if indeed there are any such people) will usually be aware that others around them occasionally conspire, and that too makes them conspiracy theorists on Pigden's definition. But if (almost) everyone is a conspiracy theorist, then the expression not only does not deserve to have negative connotations, it deserves to fall out of usage altogether, or perhaps to be reserved for fanciful philosophical thought experiments (imagine someone who believes that objects cease to exist when they are no longer observed, or who believes that that the sun will not rise tomorrow, or who believes that conspiracies never happen).

I suspect that Pigden would heartily endorse this idea, and there is certainly something to be said for it; it would be preferable to the current situation in which the expression is mired in confusion and regularly used to promote politically pernicious ends. But there are two problems with leaving things there. One is that it is not likely that the concept is going away in the short to medium term and virtually certain that it is not going away as a result of being deconstructed in philosophy journals. The second is that *some* dismissive uses of the concept seem to be legitimate.

2. CONSPIRACY THEORISTS IN THE CONTEXT OF DISCOVERY

It might be useful to compare conspiracy theorists to theorists of another kind, number theorists. A person does not qualify as a number theorist just in virtue of subscribing to a theory about numbers. The fact that I subscribe to the theory that two is even

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does not, alas, make me a number theorist. Likewise, we shouldn't say that someone is a conspiracy theorist just because he subscribes to a theory that posits conspiracy. The missing ingredient in both cases seems to be the presence of active investigation, rather than mere passive subscription. A conspiracy theorist, therefore, may be defined as a person who is unusually willing to investigate conspiracy. A conspiracy theorist, so understood, actively investigates whether conspiracies have taken place or are taking place, and when and if he discovers them tries to publicly identify the conspirators. For the rest of this section I will use the expression "conspiracy theorist" in this sense.

Notice that conspiracy theorists so understood need not be particularly inclined to *believe* in conspiracies. A person may quite rationally investigate whether a conspiracy has occurred without believing that it has, if discovering that it occurred, if it did, is important enough. There is one category of conspiracies, political conspiracies, the discovery of which is usually very important. This is because the exposure of political conspiracies is usually very important

Some political conspiracies may be harmless or even desirable, but the ideals of open and/or democratic governance create a strong *prima facie* presumption against conspiracy. In an open society citizens have a *prima facie* right to accurate and complete information about governmental processes, a right which is threatened by political conspiracies, since such conspiracies are typically directed at misrepresenting or limiting the availability of this information. Democracy requires that voting be conducted freely, and freedom requires a degree of accurate information about one's choices; political conspiracy, which inevitably reduces or distorts such information, is therefore in conflict with the ideals of democracy.

Of course, the *prima facie* importance of exposing political conspiracies when they occur does not *on its own* entail the rationality of seeking evidence of political conspiracies. If political conspiracies never, or hardly ever, take place, then searching for evidence of them would be *prima facie* irrational. But political conspiracies do take place, and on a regular basis. Pigden has argued that politics is and always has been a highly conspiratorial business by identifying a wide range of characteristically political activities which usually involve conspiracy, activities such as revolutions, wars, terrorist attacks, and parliamentary spills. This argument may be reinforced by consideration of the fact that there is an influential body of opinion which holds that moral considerations, or at least deontological moral considerations, such as prohibitions on lying and deception, have little or no place in politics. This idea comes in many forms, and I do not intend to evaluate them here. It is enough to point out that the idea has many proponents, some of whom have been close advisors to powerful politicians.[3] It should not be surprising therefore that many politicians feel that they have little or no moral obligation to be honest, at least when they are acting in their capacity as politicians. The conventional wisdom that all politicians are liars may not be entirely true, but political life is filled with temptations to dishonesty, and we know that politicians have often succumbed to those temptations.

Because political conspiracies are common and because it is usually desirable that they be exposed, it is important that there are people who are willing to investigate

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evidence of political conspiracy. The price of liberty may be eternal vigilance, but not everyone is equally obliged to pay that price. To some extent, we outsource our vigilance to specialists, political journalists, who are charged (amongst other things) with exposing political conspiracies, both to punish those responsible and to deter others. That is why being a conspiracy theorist, in the sense under consideration, is integral to the role morality of political journalists, and should be seen as such.

Conspiracy theorists are performing an important task on behalf of the community. But their task inevitably involves certain moral and epistemic risks. Conspiracy theorists risk becoming cynical as a result of being regularly exposed to some of the less pleasant aspects of life. Furthermore, like many researchers, they can be tempted to skew their findings to vindicate the importance of their research. Conspiracy theorists run the risk of becoming over-invested in the prevalence and significance of conspiracy, leading them to exaggerate evidence for conspiracies or ignore evidence against them.

3. CONSPIRACY THEORISTS IN THE CONTEXT OF JUSTIFICATION

If this happens, they will be conspiracy theorists in another sense as well. To say that someone is a conspiracy theorist in this other sense is to say that they are *excessively* willing to *believe* in conspiracy. The problem with such conspiracy theorists is not necessarily that they believe in *too many* conspiracies (they may believe in just one vast conspiracy); rather their problem is that they tend to exaggerate the extent to which conspiracies (however many of them there may be) explain observed phenomena.

This is a form of irrationality. And it is certainly what some people have in mind when they talk dismissively of conspiracy theorists. But this rhetoric has the potential to be extremely misleading. We don't normally stipulate that theorists about a certain subject matter are irrational by definition. Number theorists, for example, are not defined as people disposed to form irrational beliefs about numbers. Indeed we'd usually think of number theorists as particularly rational when it comes to such beliefs. Flat earth theorists on the other hand are obviously irrational, but they are not irrational by definition. Their irrationality consists in the fact that their putative subject matter obviously does not exist. Conspiracies by contrast obviously do.

But despite the faults of this new definition, it may be justified, to some extent, by widespread usage, which has its own authority on questions of meaning. Sometimes, therefore, we may speak with the vulgar and talk dismissively of conspiracy theorists. But if and when we do, we need to be aware that there is another form of irrationality, excessive unwillingness to believe in conspiracy, which is at least as widespread and far more dangerous. Conspiracy theorists (in the sense currently under consideration) usually only harm themselves. Those who are excessively unwilling to believe in conspiracy harm us all by making it easier for conspirators to remain undetected. We need a name for people who irrationally reject evidence of conspiracy, to provide balance to our current political discourse.

The expression "coincidence theorist", which has gained a certain currency on the

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internet, is one possible candidate. A coincidence theorist fails to connect the dots, no matter how suggestive of an underlying pattern they are. A hardened coincidence theorist can watch a plane crash into the second tower of the World Trade Center without thinking that there is any connection between this event and the crashing of another plane into the other tower of the World Trade Center less than an hour earlier. Similarly, a coincidence theorist could be aware that all 175 editors of Rupert Murdoch's publications around the world endorsed the invasion of Iraq, without seeing any connection between their expressed views and those of their boss (Greenslade 2003).

Coincidence theorists irrationally reject evidence of conspiracy, but not all who irrationally reject evidence of conspiracy are coincidence theorists. Some people, particularly some on the Left, have an irrational tendency to reject evidence of conspiracy for quite different reasons. I shall call them "institutional theorists".[4]

A typical example of institutional theorists at work can be found in the preface to *Manufacturing Consent*, where Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, anticipating the "accusation" that they are conspiracy theorists, respond pre-emptively with the claim that they "do not offer any kind of 'conspiracy' hypothesis to explain mass-media performance". They describe their alternative to a "conspiracy hypothesis" as a "propaganda model" which explains media performance in impersonal institutional terms and as "largely an outcome of market forces" (Herman and Chomsky 1989, xii).[5]

One problem with this whole line of thought is that impersonal explanations in terms of institutional structures and market forces are not inconsistent with conspiratorial explanations. Many institutions owe their existence, at least in part, to conspiracies (think of the United States government's debt to the conspiratorial activities of the founding fathers) and many institutions themselves regularly conspire. Indeed, many institutions do little but conspire (think of the CIA or the KGB). What is more, market forces are not inconsistent with conspiracy. Indeed, as Adam Smith recognised,[6] market forces frequently lead to conspiracy. More generally, social forces and institutions are not disembodied or abstract entities. They are the result, although not always the intended result, of a lot of intentional activity, much of which is conspiratorial. So, an explanation can be and often is both conspiratorial and institutional.

At the root of the institutional theorists' critique of conspiracy theorists is a concern not to offer excessively easy solutions to social problems. The worry is that conspiracy theorists encourage the idea that the road to societal improvement consists in the removal of bad people from positions of power, while ignoring the underlying structures that are the real cause of most of our problems (problems which may well include the presence of bad people in positions of power).

While there is certainly something to this concern, the alternative strategy of concentrating on systematic or institutional change comes with its own dangers. First, it can be unrealistic, at least in the short term where most of us live our lives. Second, as history has often demonstrated, the new institutions may be worse than the ones they replaced.

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The debate between conspiracy theorists and institutional theorists is reminiscent of the debate George Orwell discussed in his essay on Charles Dickens between "moralists" and "revolutionaries":

> The moralist and the revolutionary are constantly undermining one another. Marx exploded a hundred tons of dynamite beneath the moralist position, and we are still living in the echo of that tremendous crash. But already, somewhere or other, the sappers are at work and fresh dynamite is being tamped in place to blow Marx at the moon. Then Marx, or somebody like him, will come back with yet more dynamite, and so the process continues, to an end we cannot yet foresee. The central problem—how to prevent power from being abused—remains unsolved. Dickens, who had not the vision to see that private property is an obstructive nuisance, had the vision to see that 'If men would behave decently the world would be decent' is not such a platitude as it sounds. (Orwell 1961, 48)

We cannot stop power from being abused just by investigating and exposing conspiracies. But we also cannot stop power from being abused if we ignore the fact that much of that abuse is conspiratorial.

4. CONSPIRACY THEORISTS AND OFFICIAL STORIES

In my first article on the subject I characterised conspiracy theorists as people who are unusually reluctant to believe official statements (what I called, perhaps too melodramatically, "official stories"). Neil Levy argues in "Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories" (this issue) that conspiracy theorists, so understood, deserve the bad reputation they have amongst "intellectuals". He defines "the official story" as "the story promulgated by the authorities" and seeks to identify a class of authorities that "other things being equal" we ought to believe.

Before looking at Levy's argument in greater detail I want to stress that I agree that there are a class of authorities of whom this is true. This is little more than a tautology. I will join him in referring to this class as "epistemic authorities" or "experts". Levy is wrong, however, to identify the pronouncements of these people (or institutions) with "the official stories". Hence Levy's conclusion that "accepting the official story is almost always rational" does not follow from his premises.

There may be a sense of "authority" in which the pronouncements of authorities are guaranteed to have official status, but it is not the required one. Levy quite rightly distinguishes epistemic authorities from other authorities, in particular governmental ones. But although the statements of government authorities on certain topics may (and in certain circumstances perhaps must) have official status, and hence be official stories, the statements of epistemic authorities often have no official status. There are many examples which could be used to make this point, but I will confine myself to a particularly clear-cut one from a field which Levy himself identifies as a paradigm of an epistemic authority, namely science.

The rise of Lysenkoism in the Soviet Union under Stalin led to Mendelian genetics and other epistemically authoritative sciences being driven underground. In 1940

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Lysenko himself was made director of the Institute of Genetics in the USSR's Academy of Sciences. In 1948 dissent from Lysenko's doctrine of the heritability of acquired characteristics was formally outlawed (Joravsky 1970). It is clear that, during this time and in this place, the epistemic authorities and the governmental authorities were at odds, and it is equally clear that someone who believed the epistemic authorities at the time (for example, Nikolai Vavilov, who continued to do groundbreaking work in genetics until he was sent to a prison camp for advocating "bourgeois pseudoscience") would most categorically not be believing the official story; he or she would be disbelieving it.

It will be objected that my example is unfairly drawn from a totalitarian society. In our society it is possible for epistemic authorities to be (in Levy's words) "properly constituted". A properly constituted epistemic authority is a kind of structure:

> The right kind of structure is that exemplified by science: knowledge claims are the product of a socially distributed network of enquirers, methods and results are publicly available (especially, but not only to other members of the network), inquirers are trained in assessing knowledge claims according to standards relevant to the discipline, and rewards are distributed according to success at validating new knowledge *and* at criticizing the claims of other members of the network. (Levy, "Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories", this issue, 188)

These are generally admirable ideals. But they are nothing more than ideals. No actual structure, including science (that is, science as practiced by actual people in lab coats, as opposed to the idealised science that is often the subject of philosophy of science), has ever completely lived up to them. At best they have approximated them to one degree or another. Levy's naivety about this issue is particularly apparent in his claim that the media is (or is a part of) a properly constituted epistemic authority (fn. 3). I will discuss just one example to demonstrate how far this is from being true.

The methods of the media during the build-up to the ongoing war in Iraq were not in general "publicly available". The media's regular use of unnamed official sources to provide the illusion of independent verification of the official story that Iraq had significant stockpiles of banned weapons has been well-documented (for example, Dadge 2006, 131–35).[7]

Since then, rewards have palpably not been distributed according to "success at validating new knowledge" or "criticising the claims of other members of the network". Many of those who uncritically accepted the official story have seen their careers go from strength to strength, while some of those who highlighted deficiencies in it appear to have been punished for doing so (Reed 2007).[8]

It may be that in an ideal society official stories would carry an epistemic authority such that it would almost always be rational to believe them. But that is not our society, nor I suspect, is it any society that has ever been or ever will be. What is more, if such a society were to come into existence, it seems likely that it would be unstable, since the complacency about officialdom that it would engender would be exploitable by officials hoping to manipulate public opinion to advance their interests.

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Although Levy implies that my concept of an "official story" is restricted to government statements, I was always explicit that I intended the concept to be understood more broadly than that:

> Although governments are obvious sources of what I have been calling 'official stories', they are not the only sources. Both the media and the academy are, in virtue of their power to influence opinion, sources of official stories as well. (Coady 2003, 208)

Now I will be more explicit and *define* an official story as a version of events propagated by an institution which has power to influence what is widely believed at a particular time and place. I think this definition conforms to ordinary usage. Furthermore, it is, outside of any specific context, epistemically neutral. On the one hand, an institution can have power to influence what is believed for epistemically good reasons. For example, its power might result from it having a well-known track-record of accuracy, or from it being well-known to be properly constituted in something like Levy's sense. On the other hand, an institution can have power to influence what is widely believed for epistemically bad reasons. It might have that power because it has a virtual monopoly on the dissemination of information, or because it distributes rewards, not for "validating new knowledge", but for confirming the irrational prejudices of consumers of its information. I could go on, but the general point should be clear. Not only is the claim that we should almost always believe official stories false, it is dangerously self-defeating, since, to the extent that it gains widespread acceptance, official stories will be less subject to scrutiny and hence less likely to be true.

5. CONSPIRACY THEORISTS AND INTELLECTUAL AUTONOMY

But there is more to Levy's argument than his mistaken account of the relation between officialdom and epistemic authority. Levy (like Keeley before him) portrays conspiracy theorists as people who are reluctant to believe *anyone*, thinking they can work everything out for themselves and in doing so trying to be too intellectually autonomous. Conspiracy theorists, on this view, are committed to an excessively individualistic epistemology, which is blind to the extent to which we are, and should be, reliant on the expressed opinions of others.

Levy appeals to the work of cognitive psychologists who claim that most people suffer from an *illusion of explanatory depth*: they exaggerate their ability to understand the workings of familiar objects, such as flush toilets, rainbows, and tides. Levy endorses Wilson's (2004) explanation of this phenomenon, namely that it stems from a failure to realise the extent to which we are all reliant on experts. This reliance is (allegedly) so automatic and unthinking that we have a tendency to assume that we have the relevant expertise ourselves. Most of us (but conspiracy theorists more than most) fail to recognise how "radically socialized" our knowledge of the world is.

Since conspiracy theorists are (allegedly) particularly prone to be misled by the illusion of explanatory depth, they are more prone to exaggerate the extent to which they can work things out for themselves:

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> The radically socialized view of knowledge sketched here provides an explanation for why it is irrational to reject the official story. Moreover, it also helps to explain why conspiracy theories are tempting. Recall the illusion of explanatory depth: we consistently underestimate the extent to which our knowledge depends upon our location in the socially distributed network of epistemic authorities. We take ourselves to be able to understand more, far more, by ourselves than we are really capable of. Hence we take ourselves to be able to detect flaws in the official stories, flaws that the epistemic authorities have either, inexplicably, overlooked, or from which they have deliberately turned. We take the conflict between our intuitions and the explanations offered by the epistemic authorities as evidence that the latter are stupid or base rather than recognizing that the conflict is the predictable consequence of our lack of access to the relevant cognitive tools. (190)

Levy (like Keeley) seems to have misidentified the nature of the debate between defenders of the official story and conspiracy theorists. Conspiracy theorists, understood as people predisposed to be sceptical of official stories, are not (or need not be) any more sceptical about epistemic authority or expertise *as such* than other people. Rather, they merely have a particular view about who the epistemic authorities or experts are. At one point Levy himself goes some way towards conceding this:

> In fact, the conspiracy theorist herself may implicitly recognize the feebleness of the unadorned human brain. She typically seeks alternative networks of knowledge production. But these networks are shortlived and vulnerable to all kinds of distortions. They cannot compensate for the riches that our shared epistemic resources, embodying millennia of history and the labor of many thousands of agents, make available to the less sceptical agent. (190)

This looks like a straightforward *ad populum* argument buttressed by an *appeal to tradition* and these are usually classified as fallacies. Nonetheless it is true that some people trust their own epistemic resources to too great a degree, in the sense that they are less likely to have true beliefs as a result of doing so than they would have been had they instead trusted widespread and long-established epistemic traditions. In this sense, they are being irrational. But there are two problems with seeing this as a general argument against conspiracy theorists. One is that being irrational (in the above sense) is not necessarily a bad thing, and may even be an intellectual virtue. The other is that it is wrong to think of conspiracy theorists as particularly prone to this kind of belief formation anyway.

The first point can be brought out by consideration of what economists call "information cascades". These can occur when people express their opinions about the answer to a certain question in a publicly observable sequence. If the early answers exhibit a clear pattern, people later in the sequence may decide to ignore their own epistemic resources and follow the crowd. This belief forming strategy can be entirely rational from an individual perspective, especially if expertise on the question at issue is reasonably evenly spread amongst the group. The epistemic danger of this strategy, however, is that it can lead to relevant evidence being hidden from those later in the sequence. Thus the epistemic authority of thousands of people can be largely illusory,

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because most of them have had their beliefs determined by a handful of people at the beginning of the sequence.[9]

A group in this position would be epistemically better off (that is, it would be more likely that more of its members would have true beliefs) if its members were less individually rational (that is, they were more inclined to trust their own cognitive resources than could be justified by considerations of individual rationality). Hence those who refuse to follow the crowd, even when the crowd is more likely to be right than they are, are doing the crowd an epistemic favour by making it more likely that the crowd itself (or at least most of its members) gets the right answer in the end. If such intellectual autonomy is irrational, it is not a form of irrationality that should be discouraged, and it certainly does not deserve the scorn and ridicule which characterise contemporary attitudes towards conspiracy theorists.

Turning to my second point, even if such intellectually autonomous people did deserve criticism, they do not deserve to be called conspiracy theorists (in either a pejorative or a non-pejorative sense) because their "errors" have nothing in particular to do with conspiracy. If I decide on a particular occasion to reject the "riches" of "our shared epistemic resources", that need not be because I suspect some vast conspiracy to mislead us. Rather it may be because I suspect that an information cascade has caused an initial error to become widely accepted through reiteration. Conversely, to the extent that I accept these riches, I will inevitably be believing in a lot of conspiracies, since (as we have seen) many of these riches, such as history books and the nightly news, include numerous credible reports of conspiracy. Conspiracy theorists, *qua* conspiracy theorists, have no reason to be particularly sceptical of our shared epistemic resources.

6. CONCLUSION

The highly polemical way in which the expression "conspiracy theorist" is often used means that it is unlikely that any single definition can be thought of as correct. The question therefore is not what is a conspiracy theorist, but how (and whether) we should talk about conspiracy theorists.

The fact that the expression "conspiracy theorist" is usually used to silence debate and stifle enquiry has two undesirable consequences: it increases the likelihood of actual conspiracies (particularly conspiracies perpetrated by officialdom) and it makes it less likely that conspiracies will be exposed. There seem to be three strategies we could adopt in response to this problem.

First, we could stop talking about conspiracy theorists altogether and discourage others from doing so as well. This approach is suggested by Pigden's definition, according to which anyone remotely interested in their environment is a conspiracy theorist. We have seen that this approach is not entirely satisfactory. It may be the best long-term strategy, but meanwhile we need to consider some alternatives.

Second, we could continue to talk about conspiracy theorists but without the negative connotations, and particularly without the connotations of irrationality,

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that currently go along with such talk. This approach is implied by my definition of a conspiracy theorist as a person who is unusually willing to investigate conspiracy. This definition, if accepted, should lead to conspiracy theorists being viewed as valued members of the community who undertake a morally and epistemically dangerous task that most of us don't have the stomach for.

Third, we could continue to talk about conspiracy theorists as people who suffer from an epistemic vice, that of being *too willing* to believe in conspiracy, but at the same time emphasise the existence of another opposing epistemic vice, that of being *too reluctant* to believe in conspiracy. One problem we have seen with this approach is the lack of a suitable expression for the latter vice. It is difficult to find a suitable expression because there are many different forms this vice can take. Some people suffer from it because they are coincidence theorists, who see no need for explanations of even the most striking correlations. Others suffer from this vice because they are institutional theorists, who write as though human institutions are created and run without the aid of intentional human behaviour. Still others suffer from this vice because they are too trusting of officialdom or popular opinion or tradition. Until we come up with a single expression to cover all these ways of irrationally avoiding belief in conspiracy, we need to radically change the way we think about conspiracy theorists.

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NOTES

1 I will accept his definition of a "conspiracy theory" for the purposes of this paper. My central concern in the paper is with the concept of a conspiracy theorist rather than that of a conspiracy theory.

2 Pigden does not assert or imply the converse of this claim (i.e. that *only* historically and politically literate people are conspiracy theorists).

3 I am thinking in particular of Arthur Schlesinger, Henry Kissinger, George Kennan and Jeane Kirkpatrick.

4 This is a deliberate echo of the concept of "institutional analysis", which is often explicitly contrasted with "conspiracy theory". Institutional analysis of course has positive connotations, at least amongst those who practice it.

5 Despite their attempts to assure their readers, many were not convinced. Nicholas Lemann in a review in *The New Republic* claimed that "*Manufacturing Consent* is a conspiracy theory" (Lemann 1989, 36). This is misleading. *Manufacturing Consent* does, despite the authors' denials, offer numerous "conspiracy hypotheses" (many of which are very plausible, and some of which are obviously true). However it is not itself a conspiracy theory.

6 "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public." (Smith 1910, Book 1 Chapter X)

7 The use of anonymous official sources to 'confirm' the public statements of officials has become endemic in the media. This contrasts with the legitimate use of anonymity by the media to protect whistleblowers who *contradict* the official story of an organization they belong to.

8 Examples of people in the former group include Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Gordon of the *New York Times*, Jeffrey Goldberg of the *New Yorker* and Peter Beinart of *New Republic*. Examples of people in the latter group include Robert Scheer formerly of the *Los Angeles Times*.

9 Information cascades are ubiquitous. Suppose a few people go to one of two competing restaurants based on some limited evidence that it is better. Later other people with some contrary evidence suggesting that its competitor is better may nonetheless quite rationally ignore that evidence, and go to the restaurant that others have chosen. The choice of people later in the sequence to ignore their own epistemic resources can be individually rational, but the group would avoid the danger of being collectively misled if its members were more epistemically autonomous (see Coady 2006, 73–5).

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