“They” Respond: Comments on Basham et al.‘s “Social Science’s Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone”

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1 Although the article is referenced with Lee Basham as the sole author, it is in fact signed collectively, in the following order, by Matthew R. X. Dentith, Lee Basham, David Coady, Ginna Husting, Martin Orr, Kurtis Hagen and Marius Raab. We see no reason, and none is mentioned in the paper, to single out Lee Basham as the author of that piece, when all co-signatories have approved and have agreed to be associated with its contents. We thus henceforth will refer to this article as Basham et al. (2016).
Abstract

Basham et al. (2016), fear that “they want to cure everyone” of conspiracy theories. Here, “they” respond and try to put this concern to rest. The commentary “they” published in French newspaper Le Monde, with which Basham et al. take issue, cautioned against governmental initiatives to counter conspiracy theories among youths and advocated for more research on the topic. Basham et al. call instead for more conspiracy theories and less “conspiracy theory panic”. “They” attempt to explain this fundamental disagreement by “just asking” some questions, first about the definition of conspiracy theories and the conspiracist mindset, second about the possibility that Basham et al. hold an inflated view of the investigative and reasoning talents of conspiracy theorists, third about whether “they” are conspirators or Basham et al. conspiracy theorists, and fourth about the notion that conspiracy theorists should be “cured”. In the process, “they” reiterate the importance of empirical sociopsychological research to resolve issues related to the conspiracist mindset and highlight a number of problems in Basham et al.’s approach to conspiracy theories. “They” conclude on a bright note: careful and rigorous research, in the end, might help everybody become better conspiracy theorists, perhaps even Basham et al.

“How can we account for our present situation unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster?”—Joe McCarthy, U.S. Senate, 1951.


As the authors of Le Monde’s article2 targeted in Basham et al.’s (2016) comment, we are delighted to be referred to by the collective “they” in their title. Who is “they”? Now we finally know, it’s us! In the spirit of this pynchonesque homage, we thus henceforth proudly adopt this qualifier. Indeed, what could be more appropriate, in a scholarly discussion of conspiracy theories, than labelling a disagreeing party as “they”? It makes things much clearer. So “they” thank Basham et al., for permitting “them” to clarify some points of interest and addressing a few potential misunderstandings.

The crux of the matter is an open commentary “they” wrote for Le Monde (Bronner et al. 2016), in which “they” took issue with French governmental and local initiatives designed to

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2 “Luttons efficacement contre les théories du complot” [Let’s fight conspiracy theories effectively], written and signed by Gérard Bronner, Véronique Campion-Vincent, Sylvain Delouvée, Sebastian Dieguez, Karen Douglas, Nicolas Gauvrit, Anthony Lantian and Pascal Wagner-Egger, published on June 5th, 2016, in the print edition of Le Monde. As this text was widely read and shared (more than 2,000 hits on ResearchGate), the authors produced an English translation for non-French readers.
tackle the apparent proliferation of conspiracy theories among youths, a trend many deem worrying in the wake of several terrorist attacks on French soil, and in a context of ethnic and religious tensions, increased ideological polarization and ready online access to hate-speech and misinformation. “They” thought, too, that something should be done. But “they”, as scientists working on reasoning, belief formation, belief epidemiology, social influence, and related fields, figured that early and hasty endeavours had the potential to misfire or simply be ineffective. Indeed, as Basham et al.’s comment rather fittingly illustrates, suspicion towards authorities will be poorly amenable to advice and educational programs devised and offered by those very authorities.

The Need for Questions, More Research

So, what were “they” up to? Quite simply, “they” advocated for more research. “They” figured that, before “fighting” against, or “curing”, conspiracy theories, it would be good to know exactly what one is talking about. Are conspiracy theories bad? Are they good? Are they always bad, are they always good? Who endorses them, who produces them, and why? Are there different types of conspiracy theories, conspiracy theorists, and conspiracy consumers? What is the difference between people who believe in conspiracy theories and those who reject them, or between hardcore believers and those who vaguely endorse conspiracy theories or parts of them, those who acquiesce to them but don’t really believe them (Risen 2016), or those who playfully engage in conspiracy theories, share them, discuss them, but never give them any credence?

“They”, in fact, are “just asking” some questions (Aaronovitch 2010), which Basham et al. surely agree is always a good thing. Perhaps, by clarifying such and related issues, some pertaining to the conceptual and others to the empirical domains, one could get a better sense of how to address conspiracy theories, and even ascertain whether there is a problem at all. At the very least, “they” suggested in their letter, one should keep track of the already launched initiatives and obtain some measure of how they fare, if only as a matter of accountability, or even mere curiosity. Doing things right would benefit everybody: the authorities, social scientists, the kids targeted by the programs, and yes, society at large, including taxpayers.

That’s, at any rate, what “they” wrote and what “they” think. But perhaps that was naive. Perhaps “they” should just have turned to the writings of a handful of philosophers and social epistemologists, and they would have discovered that everything there is to know on the matter is in fact already known, and that any further attempt to investigate the topic would be a “grave intellectual, ethical and prudential error” (15), or worse, a genocidal crime against the masses, destroying lives “by the thousands, even millions” (16). Indeed, while reading Basham et al.’s piece, “they” shuddered at the thought that “they” could be allies to really evil people, such as, say, warmongers, Nazis, Stalinists, assassins, and the like. And pondering Basham et al.’s rhetoric, “they” also almost wondered whether “they” themselves needed to be cured from their “unethical and foolish” (15) penchants, and hopefully be saved from their “faux intellectual sophistication” (13). Even better, maybe “they” should just abandon their research and shut up about the whole thing. But, of course, that would be

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3 Unless otherwise specified, paginations refer to the pdf version of Basham et al. (2016).
intimidation and censorship, and also needlessly incendiary, so that can’t possibly be what Basham et al., as the self-avowed defenders of an open society that they are, had in mind.

**Basham et al.’s Hypothesis and the Conspiracist Mindest**

Well, let “they” see. The whole issue, it seems to “them”, is best summarized in a single point, a point which, it turns out, “they” are quite familiar with from numerous online discussions and the type of hate mail “they” regularly receive from “historically or politically literate” (12) defenders of the truth, sometimes also called “conspiracy theorists”: “But what about the real conspiracies?” Indeed, what about them? History books can be read as an endless list of failed and successful conspiracies—which everybody, including “they”, acknowledges—so, what could be wrong about conspiracy theorizing? Running parallel to this classic objection against the preemptive dismissal of conspiracy theories, is the idea that “conspiracy theory” is a rhetorical weapon used to discredit and silence any opponent holding inconvenient beliefs or exposing dangerous truths. That’s “anti-conspiracy panic” (14), or “conspiracy denialism” (15). Basham et al.’s point, it seems to “them”, can thus be framed as the following two-fold hypothesis: because real conspiracies have happened and still happen, conspiracy theories are not only warranted but necessary; the only reason this is not obvious to everyone is that “conspiracy theories” have been made to reflect badly on those who assert them by the very people they purport to unmask, and their enablers.

The heuristic value, as well as the truth or falsity, of this hypothesis would of course depend on how the concept of “conspiracy theory” is defined. The outcome of such a conceptual groundwork could then determine whether “they” are enablers of criminal conspirators with blood on their hands (or perhaps conspirators “themselves”), and also whether Basham et al. are just posturing in a desperate attempt to rationalize their own conspiracist tendencies. Now, it is true that “they” are no social epistemologists, merely a “cadre” (12) of social and psychological scientists. Fortunately, “they” believe that the issue is at its core an empirical one, to be addressed with appropriate data collection and experimental designs, not only armchair venting.

But yes, “they” agree that simply claiming that “conspiracy theories” only refer to those conspiracies that are “unwarrented” will not do (Brotherton 2013). Also, pointing out that a conspiracy theory which turns out to be true is no longer a conspiracy theory is *ad hoc* and obviously unsatisfying. Adjusting the concept of conspiracy theory to its use in common parlance, whatever that is, is not convenient and somewhat tautological. Yet claiming that “conspiracy theory” is simply a derogatory term invented by those in power to discredit inquiring minds, *pace* Basham et al. (2016), seems oddly conspiratorial and self-serving, or at the very least a rather partial approach of the issue. Likewise, asserting that a conspiracy theory is any kind of thinking or explanation that involves a conspiracy—real, possible or imaginary—and that’s all there is to it, seems like a premature attempt to settle the issue, as if the topic itself was a non-topic and anyone—and that’s a lot of people—who thinks there is something there of interest is simply misguided, or manipulated.
What do “they” make of all this? Well, “they” have another approach. As Basham et al. (2016) aptly noticed, “they” did not argue at all about specific conspiracy theories or the nature of the evidence available in favour or against them. Rather, “they” think that there is such a thing as a conspiracist mindset, also diversely called the political-paranoid style (Hofstadter 1966), conspiracist ideation (Brotherton, French, & Pickering 2013; Brotherton & French 2015; Swami et al. 2011), or conspiracist mentality (Moscovici 1987; see also Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff 2013). This is to say that, regardless of the facts available in the outside world, the mind of some people attracts and is attracted by conspiracist cognitions, which come to form a monological belief system involving conspiracies (Goertzel 1994).

Take the newly elected president of the USA, Mr. Donald J. Trump. Trump has been said to believe in, or at some point have believed or endorsed, about 60 different conspiracy theories. According to Basham et al.’s approach, this means that Trump is a relentless

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4 In their writings, Basham and Dentith, a co-signatory of Basham et al., make much of a distinction between “particularists” and “generalists”. Briefly, the former refers to an approach to conspiracy theories based on the examination of each specific claim of conspiracy and its respective argumentative and evidential merits (or shortcomings). The latter approach sees broadly conspiracy theories as a class of its own. The distinction has been put forward by Buening and Taylor (2010) who defend the particularist against the generalist view on the grounds that the generalist view a priori, and unfairly, assumes that conspiracy theories are irrational and thus need not be assessed on their own merits. Yet on closer inspection, this partition turns out to be meaningless, self-serving and self-refuting. First Basham et al. (2016) essentially claim that conspiracy theorizing is generally warranted because there are conspiracies: that is a generalist view. Moreover, the evidence shows that conspiracy theorists are generalists, in that they tend to endorse several and varied conspiracy theories (see below). Yes, “generalism” might lead to the “flippant rejection” (14) of conspiracy theories, but it might as well lead to their uncritical acceptance, a generalist stance. On the other hand, “they” never said that all propositions regarding the possibility of some nefarious intent or actions from some group of colluding individuals must be immediately rejected. In fact, “they” could as well be the “particularists” because “they” are interested in individual differences between believers and non-believers, thus assessing cognitive processes and personality profiles on a “case-by-case” (15) basis. “They” are even open to the possibility that there might be different kinds of conspiracy theories—say, minority conspiracies (Campion-Vincent 2005; Moscovici 1987; Wagner-Egger & Bangerter 2007), system conspiracies (Campion-Vincent, 2005; Moscovici 1987; Wagner-Egger & Bangerter 2007), supernatural conspiracies (van der Tempel & Alcock, 2015), in-group vs out-group conspiracies (Grzesiak & Suszek 2008; Uscinski & Parent 2014) and so forth—a particularist approach. But of course, such convolutions are only needed if one absolutely wants to build artificial rivalries and point to imaginary enemies. As it turns out, “they” see the “particularist vs generalist” distinction as orthogonal to “their” interests anyway. Bad conspiracy theorists could still come up with, or endorse, good theories about actual conspiracies, but for bad reasons. By the same token, then, good conspiracy theorists could come up with false conspiracies, although for good reasons. While this might be fascinating for political score-keeping, “they” are merely interested in the psychology of all this, and thus, the “evidential” content of specific conspiracy claims can indeed be safely put aside unless what “they” study calls up for such details.

5 http://www.alternet.org/right-wing/58-donald-trump-conspiracy-theories-and-counting-definitive-trump-conspiracy-guide. Speaking of President Trump, there are two interesting insights to be gained from his election. First, it now seems clear that the epithet “conspiracy theorist” is not such a powerful engine of delegitimization. Trump has been derided as a conspiracy theorist over and over again, and yet he still managed to get elected. Second, among Trump conspiracies, and similar to what happened with the “Brexit” vote in Britain and the recent referendum held in Italy, there were many conspiracy theories making the rounds about a “rigged” polling or electoral process. Pro- Trump, pro-Brexit and anti-Renzi outlets repeatedly claimed and feared that those in power would never allow their desired outcome to come to life. Yet it happened in all three cases, and it would be interesting to see what became of these “theories of conspiracy” when they were directly contradicted by the facts. Basham et al., in particular, could learn something about the operations of the mind when conspiracist thinking demonstrably fails, a Festinger 2.0, as it were, manifestation of cognitive dissonance, except that nowadays, there does not even seem to be any such “dissonance” anymore.
investigator. And if it is the case that Trump is indeed “theorizing” about conspiracies, wouldn’t we all be in great trouble if we chose to ignore such a bold truth-seeker and disinterested whistle-blower? On the other hand, perhaps Mr. Trump has just been mindlessly making stuff up and irresponsibly spreading nonsense all along, because of some peculiar worldview he holds and/or some cognitive and personality propensities that favour the perception and endorsement of conspiracy theories in general (in other words a conspiracist mindset). This last approach is actually, at the moment, the most robust finding in the rather recent field of social-psychological conspiracy theory research: people who believe in one conspiracy theory tend to believe in other, unrelated, conspiracy theories.⁶

Why could that be? If conspiracy believers are avid followers of Basham et al.’s (2016) advice, to wit that “we should focus, always, on the facts” (15), then they are indeed remarkable citizens, specializing, for the sake of preserving our liberties, in fields as diverse as climate science, structural architecture, geopolitics, economics, photography, history, forensics, and so on. The alternative, of course, is that many, perhaps most, conspiracy theorists simply tend to endorse conspiracy theories qua conspiracy theories, and are not, in fact, really “theorizing” about conspiracies at all, but rather driven to a specific type of propositions and explanations because of a conspiracist mindset. After all, if Basham et al. deplore that so many people mindlessly reject conspiracy theories qua conspiracy theories, they could at least entertain the possibility that many people also endorse them for the same “reason”. Especially as the conspiracist mindset hypothesis seems to be in line with other observations, which “they” think are very promising and valuable areas of current and future research (by which “they” mean actual scientific research).

First there is the remarkable rapidity of conspiracy “theorizing”. If “evidence is key” (14), as Basham et al. (2016) insist, then it is all the more incomprehensible that conspiracy theories would increasingly flourish before any evidence is available, or indeed even during the unfolding of the events being “theorized” about. What is more, some school teachers in France complain that conspiracy theories are endemic in their classes. So either there is a truly remarkable generation of 14-17 years-old already well versed in geopolitical and historical assessment of multiple lines of evidence, or there is some kind of a problem. Second, speaking of evidence, it would be interesting to investigate just what kind of evidence is assessed, and how, by conspiracy theorizers.

In their letter to Le Monde, “they” pointed out that the so-called confirmation bias could be a central feature of conspiracy theorizing, leading to the odd and frequently noted tendency of conspiracy theorists to favour “errant data” and otherwise weak sources, while ignoring or

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⁷ Come to think of it, because low ratings of endorsement are also correlated across conspiracy theories (surprise!), it might be the case that other individuals have also scrupulously examined all the evidence and came up with the conclusion that the “official story” is okay after all in all or most cases. Why should these people be any less careful and heroic investigators than their conspiracists counterparts?
dismissing (for instance, as fabricated, planted or irrelevant) “official” reports and resources. Already in 1995, McHoskey (1995) presented pioneering results in this direction, by showing that the immutability of personal theories about the real perpetrator(s) of the John F. Kennedy’s assassination (both in favor and against conspiracy theories) was associated to processes of biased assimilation and attitude polarization. Of course, this needs to be replicated and further investigated, but it suggests that at least some theories about conspiracies are the result of a biased assessment of the evidence. But only rigorous empirical research will tell, not armchair digressions or self-pity.

In the meanwhile, research has found other points of interest as well. For instance, why should it be the case that people merely interested in uncovering the lies of would-be tyrants by carefully gathering, evaluating and presenting the best evidence, would also turn out to be believers in the paranormal (Brotherton et al., 2013), outright reject well-established scientific findings (Lewandowsky, Cook, & Lloyd 2016; Lewandowsky, Oberauer, & Gignac 2013), simultaneously endorse flatly contradictory conspiracy theories (Wood et al. 2012), readily accept experimentally made-up conspiracy theories (Swami et al. 2011), and display a strong need for control in their lives (van Prooijen, 2016; van Prooijen & Acker 2015)? Wouldn’t such findings, and many others of the sort, start to make sense if it turns out that people’s interest and belief in conspiracy theories is, at least in part, the result of a conspiracist mindset? “They” think this is a plausible hypothesis.9

**Bad Conspiracy Theorists and Evidence**

“They” also think that’s all rather fascinating. What Basham et al. think, however, is up for grabs. Perhaps this is all bad science to them. Perhaps these results were forged, or simply the outcome of “a false, research-distorting assumption” (Basham 2016, 10). Perhaps “they” are all sold to the military-industrial complex, or part of some secret society. Or perhaps the results are all an artefact of the stereotype-threat induced by the negative connotation of “conspiracy theory”. Better yet: it might be the case that having a conspiracist mentality, assuming that such a construct exists, is actually an excellent predictor of the capacity to successfully expose actual conspiracies! This would need to be empirically tested, but for the time being, somehow, “they” are not holding their breath.10

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8 See also: Bruder et al. 2013; Darwin, Neave, & Holmes 2011; Lantian et al., 2016; Lobato, Mendoza, Sims, & Chin 2014; Newheiser, Farias, & Tausch, 2011; Stieger, Gumhalter, Tran, Voracek, & Swami 2013; Swami et al., 2011; van Elk, 2015; Wagner-Egger & Bangerter 2007.

9 Perhaps it is worth mentioning that some of “they”, in their quest to better—scientifically—understand such a mindset, sought to investigate the widely-made claim that conspiracy theorists have a miscalibrated appreciation of chance events, in other words, that they tend to think that “nothing happens by accident”. This was and is still claimed to be a central feature of the psychology of conspiracy theory believers (e.g. Barkun 2003; Campion-Vincent, 2005; Lewandowsky, Cook, Oberauer, Brophy, Lloyd, & Marriott 2015; Taguieff 2013). Well, “they” found that is not the case, and “they” even reported this negative finding in an actual scientific journal (Dieguez et al. 2015). Which goes to show that intuitive feelings and conceptual reasoning should, in the end, always be subjected to empirical testing. Then again, “they” also found, in the same study, the now familiar strong correlations among various conspiracy theories endorsements, which “they” now know, thanks to research, are not associated to a low prior for randomness.

10 Or perhaps Basham et al. think that regardless of the existence of a conspiracist mindset as described above, it would still be advantageous to entertain conspiracy theories rather than dismiss or avoid them. Yet, the idea that because real conspiracies happen it would be worst to dismiss conspiracy theories than to consider them carefully is simplistic at best (more about this below). To be sure, large-scale conspiracies would be an awful
Now, in the spirit of academic collegiality, “they” would like to suggest a much more plausible, and practical, way out to Basham et al.: why not simply claim that, if it is true that some people hold conspiracy theories simply out of a conspiracist mindset, then those are not real conspiracy theorists? Such people would not be theorizing at all. Rather, for whatever reason, they would be dismissing out of hand the “official narrative” being offered, or they would have decided that whatever happens in the world is never what it’s made to look like. After all, Basham et al. (2016) admit that there are, or at least there have been, “absurd conspiracy theories” (15), some perhaps merely involving “racist babbling” (13).

Other co-signatories of Basham et al. (2016) also seem to be aware of this issue. Husting & Orr (2007, 140), for instance, delegitimize the concerns of alien believers as “truly misguided” (140) and those that believe Elvis is (still) alive as “extreme” (141). Hagen (2011) does the same with Roswell conspiracy believers, whose theorizing, he laments, do nothing but discredit the good theorizing of 9/11 “inside job” theorists. Dentith (2016) seems likewise to deplore the association of conspiracy theorists with figures such as David Icke and Alex Jones. In fact, Dentith seems very worried by those he calls “conspiracists”, such as the “archetypal conspiracy theorist” built by Cassam (2016), to wit “Oliver”, who believes that 9/11 was an “inside job” based on his reading (or “research”) on his spare time. Dentith (2016) thinks that this construal might not be “the best” and indeed “suggests [that] Cassam simply shares with social psychologists the same views on those pernicious conspiracy theorist”, by which he probably means a “pathologizing” one. So, all the Olivers out there turn out to be bad, or suboptimal, or not “typical” (Dentith 2016, 24), or “dumbed down” (Dentith 2016, ft 14) conspiracy theorists, or simply, “first and foremost—people who are gullible who—secondly—just happen to be conspiracy theorists” (Dentith 2016, 24). Oliver, in Dentith’s most recent development, is thus a “conspiracist”, in other words a bad conspiracy theorist, just like David Icke, Alex Jones, alien believers, Elvis enthusiasts, in short all those who believe in “weird and wacky” (Dentith 2016, 3) conspiracies.

Of course, it is possible that gullibility, bad thinking, stupidity, mental pathology, and extremism sometimes “just happen” to be associated with belief in conspiracy theories, just as all these features can be associated with being a philosopher or a scientist. But what if...
certain cognitive biases, personality features and ideological worldviews “happen” to be correlated with belief in conspiracy theories. Well, then that would point to conspiracy theories as a specific attractor for certain social, personality and cognitive features, regardless of whether they are good or bad conspiracy theories, and that would require some explaining, not mere hand-waving.

But in the meanwhile, it is clear that Basham et al. (2016) do sometimes act as normative prescribers, deciding from their scholarly authority that some conspiracy theorists are wrong, “weird and wacky”, and even could be undermining the cause of “healthy conspiracy theorizing” (Dentith 2016, 32). Yet, somehow, Basham et al. (2016) still feel confident that “[p]oorly evidenced conspiracy theories will be quickly set aside” (14). While that would certainly be reassuring, it doesn’t say what one should make of all those “weird and wacky” (i.e., false) conspiracy theories out there. If indeed “some claims characterized as conspiracy theories are false” (Husting & Orr 2007, 131), then how do these conspiracy theories even come to life, and what can possibly explain that some of them seem not to be “quickly set aside”? Are the people who propose or endorse them crazy? Are they sick? Are they a bunch of losers (Uscinski, Parent, & Torres 2011)? Or simply stupid, gullible (Cassam 2016) or somehow epistemologically “crippled” (Sunstein & Vermeule 2009)? Are they a “caricature” of real conspiracy theorists (Hagen 2011, 15)? Perhaps they are just bad conspiracy theorists? Or are they actual conspirators, consciously striving to manipulate the masses with their forged “absurd” conspiracy theories, in order to discredit the good conspiracy theorists? Even more disturbing: it stands to reason that there are not only false conspiracy theories, but also missing conspiracy theories. Just as not all conspiracy theories have their counterpart conspiracy, not all actual conspiracies have their conspiracy theories. In those cases, where conspiracy theorists doing? Where they distracted? Did their theorizing skills somehow falter? Where they, once again, bad conspiracy theorists?

But let “they” stick to the first case: why are there false conspiracy theories around? Hard to say, when, according to Basham et al. (2016), “an evaluation of the evidence for or against [a conspiracy theory] really should be the end of the story” (13). “They” agree it would indeed be worthwhile, at least now and then, to reach “the end of the story”. But then “they” would also love to have a rational explanation of why this doesn’t always happen. Indeed, in real


12 Dentith even acknowledges that “it may still be useful to study Conspiracism and putative conspiracists, given that such a study may well explain particular cases of weird belief in conspiracy theories” (2016, 35). Well, “they” look forward to reading his research in this area, and can only lament that such an epiphany came too late for Dentith to sign our letter in Le Monde.
outside of the cozy echo chamber of radical-chic social epistemologists, the mantra that “We should always, without exception, adopt a case-by-case, evidential evaluation of all allegations of politically momentous conspiracy” (15) yields some surprising results. For one thing, one can ask: where does the buck stop? If no evidence whatsoever is found to substantiate the occurrence of a conspiracy, is that “the end of the story”, or rather evidence in favour of a really good conspiracy?

Maybe Basham et al. would agree that such perfect conspiracies are unlikely, or by definition outside of the scope of rational inquiry, and therefore they would admit that at least some kind of conspiracy theorizing, the kind involving the “preternatural” conspiracies Hofstadter (1966) had in mind, is unwarranted after all. But are there other, more mundane, claims of conspiracy that could suggest “evidence” is not really what is at stake in some (or most?) conspiracy theories? While some might think it would be helpful to obtain X-Rays of politicians to ascertain that they are truly humans and not Reptilians (or anything else), “they” remain somewhat sceptical about the value of such an inquiry. Obviously, one should first trust those who would provide and assess the X-rays, and who can trust anyone these days, especially people working with scientific equipment? More importantly, however, there is no evidence that Reptilians even exist, yet, somehow, “the end of the story” has not been reached for everybody on that issue. Why? Well, perhaps some social-psychological scientific research could help understand this mystery.

It would also be fascinating to make absolutely sure that the police officer who was shot point-blank by the Charlie Hebdo assailants is actually dead. After all, we are told by some valiant vigilantes of governmental deviousness that a clean head-shot is supposed to produce more blood than was observed in the video-recording of that murder. Perhaps, if pressed, that man’s family would confess to some false-flag operation? Again, “they” are just asking questions (Aaronovitch 2010). And what about that moon landing thing? Why can’t that most important debate be settled once and for all? The public wants to know the truth (or some of the public, at any rate). One can only hope that after 47 years of intense “moral watch” (14), the “end of the story” is just around the corner.

Perhaps Basham et al. have not been following the intense evidence checking of conspiracy theorists during the Charlie Hebdo attacks, the Bataclan massacre and the Brussels airport and subway bombings. Well, “they” have, and still are. Here’s a short selection of the type of “evidence” pursued “without censor” (15) about these events by those that practice that “essential” (13), “crucial” and “necessary” “gift of watchfulness” (16): it smells fishy; this can’t be true; real Muslims would never do that (so it must be the Jews); who really benefits from all of this?; it’s all a big lie; it’s all fake; this detail is not clearly explained; this seems to be connected to that; this thing happened in close spatial or temporal proximity with that other thing; such and such says that he is not convinced and I agree with him, and so forth, ad nauseam.

If this does not sound like the kind of democratic and epistemological hygiene that Basham et al. would prefer to see, then maybe they can contribute by helping online investigators to uncover the real truth when the next school shooting or terror attack unfolds, and show these
people how a false-flag operation is properly and correctly exposed. Likewise, real democratic heroes could benefit from Basham et al.’s lights on the fronts of the anti-vaccination movement, climate-change denialism, and, well, that very old conspiracy theory that somehow has never been “quickly set aside”, namely, that of a global Jewish conspiracy. Or perhaps these are not so “poorly evidenced” after all, and Basham et al. would like to suggest that the jury is still out? “They” are all ears.

So What are Conspiracy Theories?

True, none of this still amounts to a working definition of “conspiracy theory”. This is because “they” think that any such definition should entail a clear understanding of why some people are prone, quick and enthusiastic when it comes to endorsing, producing or spreading ideas about conspiracies, while others are not. “They” have nevertheless already provided some evidence that there seems to be such a thing as a conspiracist mindset that is quite unrelated to the available (or unavailable) “evidence” pertaining to specific claims of conspiracy. This concept of a conspiracist mindset is problematic for Basham et al.’s hypothesis, because it introduces a large set of individuals who “theorize” about conspiracies with a complete disregard for the evidence, as they are rather interested in conspiracy theories qua conspiracy theories, as long as they allow freeriding a general suspicion against the authorities or intuitively pinpointing some faceless, or not so faceless, enemy.

Here is a proposal. If this conspiracist mindset exists, then it will be especially attuned to still ongoing, unverified, vague, controversial, sensationalistic, and sometimes ultimately unverifiable theories about conspiracies. Why? Because contrary to the unveiling of real and verified conspiracies, which most often requires careful work from scholars, investigators, official agents, journalists, and people generally working on one specific issue at a time with a clear goal in their mind, that’s where the conspiracist mindset can best and endlessly display its talents. Therefore, “they” posit, a “conspiracy theory” is a powerful attractor for the conspiracist mindset, which involves features such as errant data, unfalsifiability, disregarded for and asymmetrical care in the evaluation of counter-evidence, the perception of malevolent intentions, the ascription of preternatural omnipotence and omniscience on the part of the conspirators, a taste for plain bullshit (Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler & Fugelsang 2015), and certainly other features, which all still need to be robustly tested, researched or replicated. In that respect, the content of conspiracy theories is certainly a valuable field of inquiry, but “they” believe that such research needs to work hand in hand with a more thorough understanding of the features, the mechanisms and the development of the conspiracist mindset itself, which “they” already know involves some perfectly normal and expected aspects of the human cognitive architecture, but which seem to be biased in a particular direction or excessively sensitive to a specific type of information available on the cognitive market (Bronner 2011; 2013).

At any rate, that is the kind of things “they” are working on, and “they” must say it’s all pretty interesting. Surely Marius Raab, one of the co-signatories of Basham et al. (2016), would agree, as he and his colleagues found that a conspiracist mindset predisposes individuals to endorse specific types of fictional conspiracies (Gebauer, Raab, & Carbon 2016), that conspiracy theories are “a means of constructing and communicating a set of personal values” (thus not a disinterested quest for the truth only based on the evidence), which could help “understand why some people cling to immunized, racist and off-wall
stories—and others do not” (Raab, Ortlieb, Auer, Guthmann, & Carbon 2013), and that the presence of “blatant” and “extreme statements indicating an all-encompassing cover-up” increased the persuasive power of conspiracy theories (Raab, Auer, Ortlieb, & Carbon 2013). Very interesting stuff indeed.\textsuperscript{13}

For the time being, thus, a “conspiracy theory” is what the conspiracist mindset tends to produce and be attracted to, an apparently circular definition that rests on ongoing work but is firmly grounded in relevant research fields such as cognitive epidemiology, niche construction and cognitively driven cultural studies, and could be refined or refuted depending on future results.

“Conspiracy Theorists” vs “Conspirators”

Note that, already, this approach can be profitably applied to Basham et al. (2016). Indeed, if “they” are correct, then Basham et al.’s article (and hypothesis) not only severely misses the point, but simply is a conspiracy theory as “they” define it for the time being. Notwithstanding the meek disclaimer that “they” are motivated by “the best of intentions” (14), the rest of the comment’s rhetoric is rather candidly unmistakable. Consider: even with “the best of intentions”, “they” are portrayed as to be so misguided as to be allies and analogues of the most malevolent forces that have plagued and continue to precipitate humanity into suffering, desolation and death, including Nazis, the Bush government, covert assassins, liars, and Big Brother. “They” not only utterly (and willingly?) fail to “impugn our hierarchies of power, but only defend them” (15). “They” have “blood on [their] hands” (16). And not only are “they” devising devious techno-social-engineering methods to silence the masses, but in “their” cynical outlook, “they” plan to do so with the very money of those to be censored and brainwashed. “They” are thus (at best) guilty by association, dangerous, and possibly malevolent, orchestrating something that will restrain freedom and democracy all the while protecting the interests of those in power. Also, “they” seem to be rather powerful, otherwise “they” wouldn’t be the targets of such worrying accusations. “They” must be really evil indeed, and up to no good.

Or are “they”? To make sure, one would need to be very careful in one’s appreciation of the facts. Of course, it is true that conspiracies exist, but that’s all the more reason to give some pause before accusing fellow academics of being part of one such awful conspiracy. Conversely, one should not use the phrase “conspiracy theorist” lightly if one holds a theory about “conspiracy theories” that might not please one’s opponents in the debate. It could betray some “direct association with pejorative phrases, caricature/exaggeration of claims, and the creation of equivalencies between very different claims”, as Hustig and Orr (2007, 138-139), two co-signatories of Basham et al. (2016), so perceptively wrote about “the epithet conspiracy theorist”. And that would indeed be undignified.

Now, if any of this happens in this exchange, then “they” would claim that “they” are the unlucky targets of individuals driven by a conspiracist mindset, and then Basham et al. would

\textsuperscript{13} As we say in French, one wonders what Raab, when signing Basham et al. (2016), est allé faire dans cette galère.
scream in horror that they are the targets of that stigmatizing “phrase of social manipulation” (15). As a result, we all would be running in unproductive circles, and no one likes that; presumably, not even social epistemologists.

So, with that caveat in mind, “they” scrupulously examined the method Basham et al. used to reach their damning conclusions about “they”. Did Basham et al. carefully examine the available evidence, as they insist proper conspiracy theorizing needs to be done? Did Basham et al. weight into their assessment the current socio-political context in France? Did Basham et al. stick to the text they criticize without drawing overblown inferences? Did Basham et al. consider that differences in scholarly, theoretical, and methodological approaches do not necessarily make disagreeing parties enemies or criminals? Did Basham et al. painstakingly seek to avoid “direct association with pejorative phrases, caricature/exaggeration of claims, and the creation of equivalencies between very different claims”? How exactly did Basham et al. proceed in writing their article, or the co-signatories before approvingly signing it?

Thankfully, an indication of how to respond to all these questions is directly available in Basham et al. (2016), clearly spelled out on page 15. There, Basham et al. make the claim that the “explanatory method” of what they call “official conspiracy theories”, referring to the type of conspiracies that are denounced and sanctioned by authorities or experts legitimated by the powers in place (such as the “official” version of what happened on 9/11, namely a conspiracy by Islamist terrorists), is in fact “indistinguishable” from the nonofficial, run-of-the-mill type of conspiracy theories held by ordinary people and that are systematically discredited by the same authorities and experts. “They” think this is a remarkable admission.

Quite aside from the point that “conspiracy theory” is thus shown to be “a phrase of social manipulation” (a gentle euphemism, Hustling and Orr (2007) call it a piece of “dangerous machinery” enforcing a “transpersonal strategy of exclusion” and “discursive violence”), it more importantly suggests that, according to Basham et al., the liars and criminals in place in fact use the same “explanatory method” than the minorities fighting for the truth, and conversely that these minorities use in fact the same “explanatory methods” than the conspiring malefactors they are seeking to expose. So, what gives? Simple: apparently, any “explanatory method” will do, and thanks to Basham et al., epistemology, social or not, has just become a much more accessible field.

No doubt “conspiracy theorist” can be a derogatory term (see Klein, Van der linden, Pantazi, & Kissine 2015; Kumareswaran, 2014; Wood & Douglas 2013). But then so is “conspirator”, and anyone developing or holding a conspiracy theory must have a group of conspirators in sight. Surely Basham et al. have considered the potential harm done when a false accusation of “conspirator” is lightly made, but “they” wonder whether they have pondered about the effectiveness of labelling someone “conspirator”, even, or especially, if it happens that he or she, or they, is an actual conspirator. By their reasoning, the negative value attached to “conspiracy theorist” increases the possibility that conspirators will get away with their conspiracies: “in an environment in which people take a dim view of conspiracy theories, conspiracies may multiply and prosper” (13). But does the idea that a stigma attached to the label “conspiracy theorist” increases the risk of conspiracies, and thus that conspiracy theory skeptics enable real conspirators, even make sense in the first place?
How is one to evaluate this claim without taking into account: 1) the potential cost-limiting effect of successfully discarding false conspiracies; 2) potential cases of conspiracies that unfold in such secrecy that there is not even a conspiracy theory about them to be skeptical of; 3) potential cases of conspiracies that unfold unproblematically even in the face of conspiracy theories about them that nobody or almost nobody is skeptical of, or that are endorsed by a substantial share of the population; and 4) potential cases were derogatively labelling something a conspiracy theory is ineffective in deflecting suspicions of actual conspiracy? Further, if journalists and academics with a prejudiced view of conspiracy theorists had such power in blinding entire populations, one wonders why many of them still deem conspiracy theories such a worrying issue, or even would want to “cure” them.

In light of such complications, it is probably premature, not to mention rather distasteful and slightly delusional, to start drawing the respective body counts of conspiracy theorists and those who take a dim view of them, merely based on the idea that “conspiracy theorists” is a disabling and stigmatizing epithet, which is an empirical question anyway. For all “they” know, because conspiracy theorists are presumably quite often aware that the "alternative information" they follow and sometimes endorse is routinely classified as "conspiracy theories" by those they deem untrustworthy, the label “conspiracy theorist” might in fact well reinforce their belief that they are “on to something” and have positive effects on in-group cohesion and self-esteem14.

A Cure?

Basham et al. (2016) fear that “they” want to curtail the free speech of conspiracist opinions, asking, after having made the point that whoever poisoned Alexander Litvinenko, his death had to be the result of some conspiracy: “Should we pay for a science that teaches us not to understand this?” (15). Indeed, it would be ironic that innocent people would end up paying, with their hard-earned money, for a scientific conspiracy meant at making sure that no one will ever even dare to think there could be any type of conspiracy in this world. In fact, that would not only be ironic, that would be genius, a conspiracy of the “preternatural” kind if there ever was one. “They” only wish “they” had such power and influence, but thankfully, at least for the time being, that is not what “they” had in mind. What “they” had in mind, as must be clear by now, was to study how people, on their own or under some external influence, think and come to endorse some beliefs about such things. That, “they” think, would need some data, rather than wishful thinking, ideological clamours or armchair reasoning.

Now, it is true that “they” used a medical analogy to make “their” point. Before flooding the market with a new remedy, it is good medical and scientific practice to carefully and rigorously test said remedy. Perhaps it doesn’t work, perhaps it makes things worse, perhaps it has unforeseen side-effects. At any rate, surely it would be desirable to know more about

14 If anything, evidence already suggests that labelling a conspiracist claim “conspiracy theory” does not decrease its endorsement (Wood 2015). Surely Basham et al. (2016) should be delighted by such good news (at least Basham (2016, ft 5) seems to be, somewhat).
the disease, what it is, what are its mechanisms, its etiology, its symptoms and so forth. Who
knows, maybe it would turn out that the remedy is not needed after all, as the disease might
be transitory, or even not a disease at all. Scientific research turns out to be the best currently
available tool to answer such questions, and that’s where the analogy lies with programs
devised to counter conspiracy theories.

The issue is indeed pressing, at least in France, not so much because conspiracy theories are
a danger (although they could be), but because many uninformed people are jumping on the
bandwagon and adding confusion to the issue. “They” advocate some patience, lest things
will get worse in the long run. Note that “they” are not even promoting “cognitive
infiltration” (Sunstein & Vermeule 2009)—although in some way this is what “they” are
attempting to do here, namely introducing some cognitive diversity in a spiraling and self-
congratulating clique of insulated theorizers—which effectiveness would need to be carefully
evaluated anyway. Presumably in our day and age, more technologically advanced solutions
could be devised. How about a neural micro-chip disrupting the cortical networks
responsible for conspiracy beliefs and subversive thinking in general? Indeed, why settle for
a “micropolitical power” (Husting & Orr 2007, 140) when “they” could go full bio-
psycho-political? Well, again, perhaps “they” don’t have so much power (and time, and resources)
after all, having to resort to open letters in the mainstream press to gently chastise the
government and local initiatives for taking hasty and unpredictable measures.

To repeat, “they” merely urged for more research. Many people, and this includes
philosophers, seem to think the topic of “conspiracy theories” is merely a matter of opinion
or of conceptual clarification. “They” think it is foremost a matter of empirical research and
careful hypothesis testing, and that any action designed to decrease belief in conspiracy
theories, especially in the classroom, should be based on evidence and empirically assessed at
the same time.

Even Dentith acknowledges that there might be a problem with “certain conspiracy
theorist”, perhaps even “some seeming cases of irrational, or even pathological belief in
conspiracy theories” (Dentith 2016, 36). He doesn’t say, however, to what extent these
people are a problem, how widespread “conspiracism” is, and what to do with such people
and beliefs. This is unfortunate, because had Basham et al. the answers to these questions,
they could actually help people become the good conspiracy theorists they wish everybody
were, so that no one would endorse conspiracy theories qua conspiracy theories. “They”
suggest that when this happens, the problem of those people who dismiss conspiracy theories
qua conspiracy theories would become largely irrelevant. In fact, such behaviour would be
ineffective and bizarre: the “completely sensible questions about government conduct” (13)
would simply look as such.

15 In a previous version of Dentith (2016), the pathologizing term “suffering from conspiracism” was even used
(emphasis added). Dentith, however, still writes about “healthy conspiracy theorising” (emphasis added, Dentith
2016, 32), thus pointing out the existence of unhealthy conspiracy theorising, and Basham sees no problem with
introducing the concept of “conspiracy theory phobia”, a term borrowed from clinical psychiatry (emphasis
added, Basham 2016, 8). Although, thankfully, Basham and Dentith propose no “cure” whatsoever for these
problems at least they collectively managed to medically diagnose pretty much everybody but themselves.
Indeed, what would be best for democracy and the open society? An army of *bad* conspiracy theorists, jumping on every semi-cooked counter-explanation available on the cognitive market out of a conspiracist mindset, wasting precious time and resources on worthless and discrediting ventures, or *good* and thoughtful conspiracy theorists, asking tough and relevant questions on the basis of a careful and unbiased examination of the facts? Now, imagine if some kind of education and basic principles, based on scientific evidence, could help obtain the latter, and reduce the former, wouldn’t that be fantastic news? Or maybe this idea is an unacceptable infringement on one’s basic freedom to be systematically misguided, wrong and isolated, and deserves an angry and self-righteous response.

Obviously, Basham *et al.* are entirely free to perceive and construe the proposal to pursue research on the topic of conspiracy beliefs as, say, a “transpersonal strategy” for “othering” “certain voices” (Husting & Orr 2007), a slippery-slope towards dehumanization and abuse (Hagen 2011), or, more positively, an encouraging sign that the ongoing “conspiracy panic” demonstrates that political tyrannies will no longer be tolerated by the increasingly enlightened public. Whatever “cure” “they” end up devising, if any, “they” are not so gullible as to think it will work for everybody. But let “they” propose a deal.

“They” will continue to focus on the psychology and sociology of conspiracy theories, conceived as the outcome of situational factors, personality, and cognitive traits largely unrelated to the truth or falsity of said “conspiracies”. In the meanwhile, Basham *et al.* will carry on their defense of those that aim, driven by the “gift of watchfulness” and their idiosyncratic “explanatory method”, at closely monitoring and exposing the criminal tyrants and liars that would like to rule the world and mislead the public. Hopefully, together, “they” and Basham, Dentith, Coady, Husting, Orr, Hagen, and Raab will help the world become a better place. Already, or so “they” are told by undisclosed sources of information, it appears that the powerful are shaking in their boots.

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