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A Conspiracy Theory is Not a Theory About a Conspiracy

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The simplest and most natural definition of a conspiracy theory is a theory about a conspiracy. Although this definition seems appealing due to its simplicity and straightforwardness, the problem is that most narratives about conspiracies do not fulfill the necessary requirements of being a theory. In everyday speech, mere descriptions, explanations, or even beliefs are often termed as "theories"—such repeated usage of this technical term is not useful in the context of scientific activities.

Here, a theory does not aim to explain one specific event in time, e.g. the moon landing of 1969 or the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, but aims at explaining a phenomenon on a very general level; e.g. that things with mass as such gravitate toward one another—independently of the specific natures of such entities. Such an epistemological status is rarely achieved by conspiracy theories, especially the ones about specific events in time. Even more general claims that so-called chemtrails (i.e. long-lasting condensation trails) are initiated by omnipotent organizations across the planet, across time zones and altitudes, is at most a hypothesis – a rather narrow one – that specifically addresses one phenomenon but lacks the capability to make predictions about other phenomena.

Narratives that Shape Our Minds

So-called conspiracy theories have had a great impact on human history, on the social interaction between groups, the attitude towards minorities, and the trust in state institutions. There is very good reason to include "conspiracy theories" into the canon of influential narratives and so it is just logical to direct a lot of scientific effort into explaining and understand how they operate, how people believe in them and how humans pile up knowledge on the basis of these narratives.

A short view on publications registered by Clarivate Analytics' *Web of Science* documents 605 records with "conspiracy theories" as the topic (effective date 7 May 2018). These contributions were mostly covered by psychological (n=91) and political (n=70) science articles, with a steep increase in recent years from about 2013 on, probably due to a special issue ("Research Topic") in the journal Frontiers of Psychology organized in the years 2012 and 2013 by Viren Swami and Christopher Charles French.

As we have repeatedly argued (e.g., Raab, Carbon, & Muth, 2017), conspiracy theories are a very common phenomenon. Most people believe in at least some of them (Goertzel, 1994), which already indicates that believers in them do not belong to a minority group, but that it is more or less the *conditio humana* to include such narratives in the everyday belief system.

So first of all, we can state that most of such beliefs are neither pathological nor rare (see Raab, Ortlieb, Guthmann, Auer, & Carbon, 2013), but are largely caused by "good"[1] narratives triggered by context factors (Sapountzis & Condor, 2013) such as a distrusted

[1] It is important to stress that a "good narrative" in this context means "an appealing story" in which people are interested; by no means does the author want to allow confusion by suggesting the meaning as being "positive", "proper", "adequate" or "true".

society. The wide acceptance of many conspiracy theories can further explained by adaptation effects that bias the standard beliefs (Raab, Auer, Ortlieb, & Carbon, 2013). This view is not undisputed, as many authors identify specific pathological personality traits such as paranoia (Grzesiak-Feldman & Ejsmont, 2008; Pipes, 1997) which cause, enable or at least proliferate the belief in conspiracy theories.

In fact, in science we mostly encounter the pathological and pejorative view on conspiracy theories and their believers. This negative connotation, and hence the prejudice toward conspiracy theories, makes it hard to solidly test the stated facts, ideas or relationships proposed by such explanatory structures (Rankin, 2017). As especially conspiracy theories of so-called "type I" – where authorities ("the system") are blamed of conspiracies (Wagner-Egger & Bangerter, 2007)—, such a prejudice can potentially jeopardize the democratic system (Bale, 2007).

Some of the conspiracies which are described in conspiracy theories that are taking place at top state levels could indeed be threatening people's freedom, democracy and even people's lives, especially if they turned out to be "true" (e.g. the case of the whistleblower and previously alleged conspiracist Edward Snowden, see Van Puyvelde, Coulthart, & Hossain, 2017).

Understanding What a Theory Genuinely Is

In the present paper, I will focus on another, yet highly important, point which is hardly addressed at all: Is the term "conspiracy theories" an adequate term at all? In fact, the suggestion of a conspiracy theory being a "theory about a conspiracy" (Dentith, 2014, p.30) is indeed the simplest and seemingly most straightforward definition of "conspiracy theory". Although appealing and allegedly logical, the term conspiracy theory as such is ill-defined. Actually a "conspiracy theory" refers to a narrative which attributes an event to a group of conspirators. As such it is clear that it is justified to associate such a narrative with the term "conspiracy", but does a conspiracy theory has the epistemological status of a theory?

The simplest definition of a "theory" is that it represents a bundle of hypotheses which can explain a wide range of phenomena. Theories have to integrate the contained hypotheses is a concise, coherent, and systematic way. They have to go beyond the mere piling up of several statements or unlinked hypotheses. The application of theories allows events or entities which are not explicitly described in the sum of the hypotheses to be generalized and hence to be predicted.

For instance, one of the most influential physical theories, the theory of special relativity (German original description "Zur Elektrodynamik bewegter Körper"), contains two hypotheses (Einstein, 1905) on whose basis in addition to already existing theories, we can predict important issues which are not explicitly stated in the theory. Most are well aware that mass and energy are equivalent. Whether we are analyzing the energy of a tossed ball or a static car, we can use the very same theory. Whether the ball is red or whether it is a blue ball thrown by Napoleon Bonaparte does not matter—we just need to refer to the mass of the ball, in fact we are only interested in the mass as such; the ball does not play a role anymore. Other theories show similar predictive power: for instance, they can predict (more

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or less precisely) events in the future, the location of various types of material in a magnetic field or the trajectory of objects of different speed due to gravitational power.

Most conspiracy theories, however, refer to one single historical event. Looking through the "most enduring conspiracy theories" compiled in 2009 by TIME magazine on the 40th anniversary of the moon landing, it is instantly clear that they have explanatory power for just the specific events on which they are based, e.g. the "JFK assassination" in 1963, the "9/11 cover-up" in 2001, the "moon landings were faked" idea from 1969 or the "Paul is dead" storyline about Paul McCartney's alleged secret death in 1966. In fact, such theories are just singular explanations, mostly ignoring counter-facts, alternative explanations and already given replies (Votsis, 2004).

But what, then, is the epistemological status of such narratives? Clearly, they aim to explain – and sometimes the explanations are indeed compelling, even coherent. What they mostly cannot demonstrate, though, is the ability to predict other events in other contexts. If these narratives belong to this class of explanatory stories, we should be less liberal in calling them "theories". Unfortunately, it was Karl Popper himself who coined the term "conspiracy theory" in the 1940s (Popper, 1949)—the same Popper who was advocating very strict criteria for scientific theories and in so became one of the most influential philosophers of science (Suppe, 1977). This imprecise terminology diluted the genuine meaning of (scientific) theories.

Stay Rigorous

From a language pragmatics perspective, it seems odd to abandon the term conspiracy theory as it is a widely introduced and frequently used term in everyday language around the globe. Substitutions like conspiracy narratives, conspiracy stories or conspiracy explanations would fit much better, but acceptance of such terms might be quite low. Nevertheless, we should at least bear in mind that most narratives of this kind cannot qualify as theories and so cannot lead to a wider research program; although their contents and implications are often far-reaching, potentially important for society and hence, in some cases, also worthy of checking.

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