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Reply to Claus-Christian Carbon: “Conspiracy Theory,” a Valid World-Shaping Scientific and Analytic Category

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“Conspiracy theories” are reviled by some, typically “elites” of limited kinds—political, corporate media and academic—and in many cases suspected to be true and even believed by far, far more people.¹ This reality puzzles some, reassures others.

Whatever the proper attitude, within the research community there is still lingering uncertainties about how to understand the phrase itself. (To say nothing of how to conduct its subsequent research.) In 2018, while visiting my friends and colleagues in psychology, Marius Raab and Claus-Christian Carbon, along with fellow philosopher M.R.X. Dentith, we had a conversation concerning the deployment of “theory” in the context of the expression “conspiracy theory.”

Note the potential plural, “conspiracy theories.” Are these instances of *theory*? Carbon announced his mid-night revelation, one visiting him the evening before: Conspiracy theories are not *theory*. So, science shouldn’t speak of them as such. Science studies Theory. Which is utterly general. The conspiracy theory of event x is not a theory proper. The term “conspiracy theory” of x has no place in serious science or analysis. Because there is no overarching *theory* here. An intriguing idea that had clearly, deeply possessed him in a very short space of time. And here we were, wandering the halls of his lab in Bavaria, the philosophers of conspiracy theory, but we had no *theory*. How embarrassing.

We disagreed and explained that a conspiracy theory of event x is an instance of a theoretical template, entirely general, and there was nothing violent to natural language or science by calling particular instances of conspiracy theory themselves theories of the events in question. I offered Carbon could substitute “conspiracy explanation” for the various instances of the conspiracy theory template, if he wished.

When is “Theory” a “Theory”?

Carbon raises what at first seems merely a linguistic, not conceptual, issue: In what sense are particular conspiracy theories instances of a theory at all? And that’s a good question. True, the best of our science studies *theory*. As does our epistemology. These generalities quantify over instances. Are terms like “conspiracy theories” the disorganized, multitude of falling dandruff of an already epistemically shaky civilization? To be combed out of its many political and economic tangles? Or is there a background, unifying conception? I think there is. We will outline this below. For the moment, consider: The quantum mechanical theory of the spectrum of a particular light bulb is a theory, and also an instance of an overarching theory of quantum mechanics, and this is hardly a problem for physicists. The instance and explanatory template distinction suffices.

Carbon’s desire to distance psychological science from the study of “conspiracy theories” is surprising, as so much of social psychology is grounded upon and publicly funded by

¹ In part, this article serves as a reply to: Carbon, Claus-Christian. 2018. “A Conspiracy Theory is Not a Theory About a Conspiracy.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 7 (6): 22-25. Hereafter referred to as “Not Theory.”

invoking the very term. It might be useful. This is not much ado about nothing. The governmental and media pathologizing project aimed at popular “conspiracy theorizing”, in the headwinds of current culture and well-established history, requires a massive amount of money, typically government sourced, and mainstream media echoed, to make progress. For one to claim, in this current political panic² that they do not study conspiracy theories, because scientifically speaking, there are none, is surprising for a well-funded researcher. Interesting though.

An accomplished research psychologist, Carbon still objects to the term “conspiracy theory” in this context because the conspiracy theories we were discussing are instances of conspiracy theory, particular theories. The simplest and most natural definition of a conspiracy theory is a theory about a conspiracy. He recently writes,

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.³

Though he was unwilling to accept the substitution “explanation” in instances, offered before, here he resorts to it. Yet conspiracy theory does *seem* to conform as a general technical term, an explanatory type, or the notion would not be so usefully deployed in this passage and in science and analytical epistemology in general. Carbon adds,

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.⁴

This is true, and a good thing, too: Conspiracy cognition is a *conditio humana*. So is mental evolution and tactical deception. And no surprise, an important and often reliable *conditio*. Common entities have common natures in most cases. Here is surely a generality of *kind*.

And yet,

The wide acceptance of many conspiracy theories can further [be] 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 &

² One I would argue is a manufactured panic and lucrative, especially in academia.

³ “Not Theory,” 22.

⁴ “Not Theory,” 22.

Ejmsont, 2008; Pipes, 1997) which cause, enable or at least proliferate the belief in conspiracy theories.⁵

This is important. “Adaptation effects”? Say, to reality? Here we also find a reference (the latter) to the *pathologizing project* current in a faction and a fashion of social scientists. It is an unfortunate orientation. There is nothing wrong, politically, with examining and entertaining conspiracy suspicions and beliefs. Of course, conspiracy theories *are* standard beliefs, and these are frequently rational. That’s why this conversation is happening. So, the contrast point in the former approach mentioned above is unclear. But the pathologizing project aims to establish these beliefs and suspicions as personal and social pathologies. Many things can be explained in many ways, but the systematic and overt *neglect* of evidential reasoning that leads most people to accept many conspiracy theories as probable is the hallmark, and I argue the downfall, of most current social science research: The pathologizing project includes a relentless, *tacit neglect* of conspiracy theory reasoning as rational, just as much as it emphasizes the *explicit accusation* of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) style mental disorders, as we find in cultural editorialists like Daniel Pipes.

Standard Beliefs? By What Standard?

So, what then are “standard beliefs”? Now here is a real concern, not just a semantic one, for science. How are “standard beliefs” established as benchmarks of science, if not by being common? Or by an evidential standard? Or are they excretions of an academic elite bent on self-defense and subsequent moralizing? Because conspiracy theories *are common*. So which is it? Or combination of the above? Is this instead the importation of a normative, political claim? If not normative, commonality is the standard of “standard”. If not, an uncommon epistemology is being invoked, probably a moralized one, a politically powerful one, that we need to hear more about. Perhaps even a political piety? Political piety is, in the current epoch, the unfortunate penchant to believe whatever government and corporate media tell us to.

Do not let the internet as such mislead us. The normality of conspiracy theory is not the issue. It is normal. The diversity of its instances, as we now can experience in the internet, a non-hierarchical, horizontal media, is new. But this is an epistemic triumph, not proper ground-work for a social panic. Political piety seems, rather, a fundamentalist political religion.

Political piety is often a bad plan. In any epoch. Conspiracy concerns are, and ought to be, ubiquitous in a functional democracy and in personal life. It is intelligence, at every level and walk of social life. This has been discussed and established in the literature at great length.

Physics Envy

⁵ Notice that “...cause, enable or at least proliferate” are each very different notions. Here the distinctions between architects, popularizers and audiences loom large. See my forthcoming “Miami Conspiracy Theory Conference” 2020.

Psychology strives to be a real science, so in its struggles, there is a phenomenon known as “physics envy.” They wish their studies to resemble that of physicists. Clear, exacting, with known, exact variables and outcomes. Recall Wundt, Watson and Skinner. This has eluded them. For instance, consider the replication “crisis” that has troubled the industry.⁶ Carbon reiterates his concern about particular conspiracy theories,

[Suppose we drop a ball] 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 [color] does not play a role anymore. [However, gravity does.]⁷

And,

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.⁸

This is correct in characterization, mistaken about prediction. True, one would expect the compelling to be at least coherent. Hopefully it is. But conspiracy theory has powerful analytical tools of cross-context *prediction*. Carbon distills his point about instances of theory and the theory these are instances of,

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 in 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.⁹

This seems sufficient for our purposes. These things, “theory,” must include a discernable, concise, coherent, and systematic template.

Agreed. And the conspiracy theory structure as a type parallels this. Conspiracy theory is an orderly general theory of explanation; given appropriate variables, it makes appropriate and reliable predictions. Of course, compared to the mathematical simplicity of a bouncing ball, there are additional considerations. A denial of cross-context prediction ignores many factors that converge into solid predictions and reliable after the fact as well as prior explanations (predictions). The basic template of conspiracy theorizing functions as an entirely general and reliable one, when the features of this framework are fulfilled. Just like physics in Napoleon’s selection of ... his colored balls, we are ignoring particularities when

⁶ “Estimating the Reproducibility of Psychological Science” *Science*, v. 349, issue 6251. The results are not edifying.

⁷ “Not Theory,” 23.

⁸ “Not Theory,” 24.

⁹ “Not Theory,” 23.

examining the basic framework and applying it: The prior probability of conspiracy, the triangle of crime (motive, opportunity and ability) identifying probable suspects, the concept of organized deception and its prerequisites, the application of evidence upon the subsequent possibilities as confirming an instance of the conspiracy hypothesis. “Conspiracy theory” is theory in Carbon’s sense and usage. And it is here that the concern he raises is most easily assuaged; a philosopher of science would count “conspiracy theory” as a scientific category in social science, and its application, scientific if correctly conducted.¹⁰

What is a “Conspiracy Theory” as Theory?

Without further ado: Conspiracy theory’s all too discernable, concise, coherent, and simple template appears to be,

- 1) Potential communication between potential conspirators.
- 2) The combined conspirators’ perception that they do, or will, satisfy the triangle of crime: Motive, Ability and Opportunity.
- 3) Probable cooperative intent by the conspirators to deceive on that basis (conspiracy).
- 4) Prior probability of conspiratorial behavior based on similar contexts, the same agents and similarly situated agents.
- 5) Evidential rejection of coincidence-theory bias (“it is all just a coincidence”) and any irrational factors that engender it.¹¹

This is a well ordered, *entirely general* template, a *kind*, one worthy of the accolade “proven theoretical apparatus”. In short, a theory-type of human behavior. One suitable for science, law enforcement and ordinary, personal life. It is, as law enforcement and legal professionals reading this might note, their own background theory. But there is no error in calling the application of this template to a particular instance a “theory” of that instance. Here, theory just means “explanation” of this *kind*.

Let us illustrate. Recall the apparent US allowance of the Japanese attack on Pearl harbor on December 7th, 1941, as a pretext for entering WWII. Today, this is a valid and often well received position among academic historians. Here the main concern, as documents now show, was not the Japanese, but by leveraging the Axis treaty of mutual support, to enter into the war in Europe against Nazi Germany. If the British fall so goes all. Including the

¹⁰ See Kurtis Hagan (2017) for a fine critique of the current social psychology as applied to conspiracy theory, “What Are They Really Up To? Activist Social Scientists Backpedal on Conspiracy Theory Agenda.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6 (3): 89-95.

¹¹ For instance, political piety; again, the penchant to simply believe what authorities, be they governmental or corporate media, tell one.

United States. In a memorandum of 1940 to president Roosevelt, Lieutenant Commander Arthur McCollum explains,

In the Pacific Japan by virtue of her allegiance with Germany and Italy is a definite threat to the security of the British Empire and once the British Empire is gone [by Nazi conquest of the British Isles] the powers of Germany-Japan and Italy will be directed against the United States ... If by these means Japan could be provoked to commit an overt act of war, so much the better. In all events, we must be fully prepared to accept the threat of war.¹²

Here is motive. Next to opportunity and ability, in this case both unique to FDR's administration:

McCollum outlines many ways for the US to provoke an attack by Japan. Most all of which were implemented; the essential thrust was resource denial, particularly of iron and oil.¹³ And Japan was, accordingly, provoked in the manners outlined. McCollum concludes that we must provoke this war for Europe's sake. Captain Joseph Rochefort styled it a "pretty cheap price to pay for unifying the country."¹⁴ The truth was toxic,¹⁵ the pay-off, immense. Only now can we reflect on this with relative dispassion.¹⁶

Rochefort appears to be right. If a gamble on consequences are our leading light. Added to information we now have on the details of US knowledge of the exact movements of the main task force of the Japanese Navy carriers towards Hawaii and Pearl Harbor (we now know they did break radio silence and the US monitored accordingly), the sudden withdrawal of US carriers from Pearl Harbor, the careful omission of intelligence information to the main Naval commander at Pearl Harbor, Admiral Husband E. Kimmel of the US Pacific fleet, and additional evidence, the case that the US wisely provoked and then intentionally allowed the Japanese attack, by design, is well on its way to success.¹⁷ Coincidence is ruled out. Conspiracy is, in fact, by far the simplest explanation of the evidence before us today. As it was then, had that evidence been made public. Which of course, it was not, for a multitude of reasons, even if known, as it was, by scores of military officers and intelligence analysts.¹⁸ So little worry of revelation in War time, and a high price for the (arguably treasonous) attempt, in both courts: Law and public opinion.

¹² Stinnett, Robert, *Day of Deceit* (referred to hereafter as *Deceit*) Simon and Schuster, 2000, "McCollum's Action Proposal," Appendix A, 271-277.

¹³ Note that a number of *realpolitik* arguments for the invasion of Iraq at that time also invoked resource denial, targeting, among others, Iran and China.

¹⁴ See Rochefort's *Reminiscences of Capetian Joseph J. Rochefort* (US Naval Institute Oral History Division, 1970), 163.

¹⁵ See, Basham, Lee. 2018. "Joining the Conspiracy." *Argumenta* 3 (2): 271-290, for a discussion of the problem of toxic truths in our information hierarchy.

¹⁶ What I term, with others, the "United States of Amnesia" syndrome.

¹⁷ Admiral Kimmel's family applied to the US Navy to posthumously reinstate his rank, decades after he was court martialled for "gross incompetence" concerning the attack on Pearl. They argued this alleged incompetence was intentionally manufactured by Washington. Predictably, the US Navy dismissed their well-evidenced appeal with a terse rebuke of the very idea.

¹⁸ See *Deceit* appendixes B through E, 278-318.

We see all five points of our *conspiracy theory template* are exemplified in the Pearl Harbor example. Conspiracy theory is a general explanatory method, a rational one. History and ordinary experience show that the claim conspiracy theory does not generate, and reliably, predictions over a vast range of circumstances is incorrect. The instances of these attempts and numerous successes are *conspiracy theories*. Which simply means the application of the above template to particular cases.¹⁹

This is what we witness in countless reports and research documents issued by the social sciences and others. Social science researchers and others, such as epistemologists, have nothing to fear from, or to lose in rigor, when discussing conspiracy theory on the basis of particular instances of it, the “conspiracy theory” of x, y or z. But they have much to gain.

Alternative Semantics?

Carbon ends by commenting, and perhaps lamenting, that terms like “organized deception”, “conspiracy explanation” and so forth (collusion...) have little or no currency in English and similar languages, and so will not suffice to deal with his concern; that we call a “conspiracy theory” a “theory.”²⁰

That is surprising. These terms are immediately identifiable and understandable, as the reader just experienced. And interchangeable. It is a type, a kind. These are just different ways of saying “conspiracy theory”. With the manifest decline, both popularly and academically, of the pejorative connotation of “conspiracy theory” as an explanation likely to be false, irrational or otherwise morally corrupt, we actually have highly useful term, *sans* mal-biasing and other pathologizing prejudices, in “conspiracy theory”, both as applied to x, or as the background framework applied.

The essential question, should “Conspiracy Theory” and “Conspiracy Theories” be valid world-shaping scientific and analytic categories? Yes, and they already are. Much can be predicted from the insights and rational suspicions and concerns of our minds, on the basis of evidence, and the proper pattern required, as a matter of logic, from “conspiracy theory” and its application to instances. As all analytic and empirical research employs. The term “conspiracy theory” can be abused when they are simultaneously pathologized as such; perhaps as “non-standard” beliefs. But among social primates, where conspiracy and its recognition are normal activities, this would be an attack on reason itself.

The fundamental question “What is theoretical about conspiracy theories?” is important.²¹ I believe we gain nothing by abandoning the term “conspiracy theory” either in analysis or empirical research, but might gain a great deal of confusion if we do. Imagine the rewrite of the last 20 years of commentary required. Why bother? Substitute “conspiracy explanation”

¹⁹ And, perhaps, richer more elaborate versions based upon it.

²⁰ “Not Theory,” 23.

²¹ See, Dentith, M R. X. and Martin Orr. 2017. “Clearing Up Some Conceptual Confusions About Conspiracy Theory Theorising.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6 (1): 9-16.

if need be. But remember: A rose is a rose...by any other name. And each rose is a member, an instance, of the genus, *Rosaceae*.²²

²² Carbon's concern is also dealt with if we use "theory" in the lower case when discussing instances and use upper case "Theory" when discussing the general template. So be it. I'll be happy to. But this is not a difference that makes a needed difference. Context is sufficient.