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An Interview with Steve Fuller on Conspiracy Theories and Post-Truth

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Hello Steve Fuller,

I am a year 12 high school student from Sydney, Australia. For one of my subjects, ‘Society and Culture’, I am currently completing a large scale major work, called a ‘Personal Interest Project’. For this project I have decided to choose the topic of post-truth and its connection to conspiracy theories. Part of the project requirements is to conduct primary research about the topic. I have read some of your work, and have found it very interesting.

I am contacting to ask if I could interview you via email by sending a few questions to you about post-truth and conspiracy theories to assist my research.

Questions:

1. What country are you from?

United Kingdom

2. Do you believe in conspiracy theories?

I personally tend not to believe in them, but some of them are worth checking out by independent means—i.e. not by the people promoting them.

3. Have you noticed an increase in conspiracy theories in the last 20 years? Justify your reasoning.

I recall conspiracy theories throughout my entire life—e.g. the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 immediately spawned conspiracy theories which continue to this day. What’s changed is that social media allows conspiracy theories greater visibility—they are no longer limited to a cult; rather, they can easily go viral and all sorts of people can start believing in them. Generally speaking, conspiracy theories appeal to people who think of themselves as ‘well informed’ and see the world going in surprising directions that they don’t like.

4. Have conspiracy theories changed our society and the way people act?

They have contributed to a general scepticism towards established authority, but social media is the ultimate cause of that. Conspiracy theories are only one of the beneficiaries of that tendency.

5. Are conspiracy theories and extremism a threat to our society?

Not really. However, I do think more explicit education about them—why they appear to appeal and what’s wrong with them —would be a good idea. Perhaps we might ‘immunize’

ourselves against conspiracy theories, so we're able to question whether they truly make sense under close examination.

6. Do you believe conspiracy theories will gain more popularity in the near future, if so why/why not?

Yes, social media will insure that. People nowadays have access to so much information, which they put together in their own idiosyncratic ways—and they can consolidate those views with others who think in similar ways. So the echo chamber/filter bubble aspect of social media is a breeding ground of conspiracy theories. However, the bright side is that the more conspiracy theories are proliferated, the less people may be inclined to believe them.

7. Why is it that we so readily accept information?

We don't! The point of conspiracy theories is that they are designed as alternative accounts to what 'established authorities' have said about some surprising and complex matter of public interest.

8. Has the development of the post-truth phenomenon through the rise of fake news impacted conspiracy theories?

I personally think that 'post-truth' is just a general name for these phenomena. By the time the Oxford English Dictionary made 'post-truth' word of the year in 2016, fake news and conspiracy theories had been happening for a long time—but now they were seen as having impact on issues of more general political import such as Brexit and the election of Trump as US President.

9. Does silence in the face of lies imply concession?

As I've suggested above, I believe that people should be educated about conspiracy theories in schools. However, in a free society, it's each individual's responsibility to decide whether to believe or not believe such things—and how much effort one wishes to invest in dealing with conspiracy theories. People normally believe all sorts of crazy and outright false things about the world that don't matter because they usually have no real world consequences. However, in 2016 they did. If Brexit and Trump didn't happen, we wouldn't be talking about this topic so much.

10. Is there justification for today's politicians and those in power to manufacture "noble lies"? Explain your response.

I don't think that's quite what happens today. When Plato spoke of 'noble lies' more than 2000 years ago, he really meant telling people persuasive stories that were very much false but nevertheless served to keep the social order intact. However, politicians in modern democratic societies are more about keeping their possibilities for action open—and so, they say things that are designed to stop others from limiting those possibilities. This sometimes

means telling people what they want to hear or being deliberately vague when there is genuine uncertainty but you don't want people to get too alarmed. What's different now is that the level of access to information on social media means that it's easier than ever to catch out politicians when they utter such 'fibs'.