



SERRRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

On the Worth of Trying

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Riggio, Adam. 2022. "On the Worth of Trying." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (11): 29-37. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7lp>.

The core of the problem of whether institutions of scientific knowledge can hold onto their legitimacy is a matter of trust. When I take a COVID vaccine, I do so trusting that the institutions and organizations involved in developing and distributing this medical technology have the knowledge they claim to have. I recognize that other people legitimately have different levels of trust in those institutions. Each of us will have different standards for how a person or an institution can earn that trust.

An attitude among some who study the social aspects of our knowledge is that commitment to democratic principles require us to stop there. If individuals will vary in how they understand the world, then a free society will give all those variations opportunity to ebb and flow in their natural movements. Those movements are the critiques of knowledge, institutions, obligations, and values across societies as people in communities negotiate their lives with each other. The free play of knowledge must proceed without constraint. Anything short of this freedom introduces authoritarian strictures in the production of knowledge.

Why One Person Decided to Write

I found this notion so shocking because I had become accustomed to a world without the good faith such freedom requires. Seeing the content of COVID conspiracies themselves given serious attention in the SERRC community as legitimate alternatives to mainstream scientific consensus shocked me, with what I felt at the time was dangerous naïveté. In personal correspondence, one colleague described the book *Merchants of Doubt* by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway as a landmark influence on his own method. That book investigated the corporate public relations model pioneered in the tobacco industry and perfected in resistance to climate action: elevating mediocre or corrupt scientific research about a destructive business model to encourage public confusion and skepticism that delays regulatory action against it.

The denialist model kicked into overdrive in response to the COVID pandemic. Many conservative political parties and business groups in the West opposed the economic sacrifices and government action required for its mitigation, whether motivated from ideology or naked greed. Research of dubious quality that sowed doubt in the trustworthiness of modern medicine already existed in popular alternative health and wellness culture. A minority of the wellness community's extremists were vaccine skeptics, who justified their beliefs largely on fraudulent research in the fashion of the corrupt Andrew Wakefield. I have read research about this community, as well as known members on a personal basis, having partied with hippies from upper-middle-class backgrounds who were vaccine skeptics. Vaccine skepticism is also a minority belief in the black communities of the United States, who have long been victimized in their medical institutions from systemic racism's micro-aggressions to intentional experimentation.

I saw the public relations model of sowing confusion and skepticism in the popular news media around me as the COVID pandemic's most intense first years wore on. That context of confusion and doubt permits sympathetic political leaders to minimize the seriousness of

the problem. Skepticism's continuing popularity makes serious mitigation measures appear unnecessary, and culminated in a popular movement of outright denial. I saw that movement peak in the downtown of my country's capital in a three-week fascistic mirror of Occupy that redefined freedom as the freedom not to care for anyone but yourself. The similarity of all this COVID-skeptical content to climate-skeptical and cancer-skeptical content was obvious, at least to me. Yet Lee Basham still tells me in an email that he thinks *Merchants of Doubt* is brilliant. I don't understand it.

Democracy as Absolute Openness

A perennial problem of democracy is setting a range of reasonable disagreement and the thresholds beyond which it is forbidden. The problem is perennial because all social changes pressure every society to renegotiate among all its shifting interests what is acceptable and what is intolerable. A few generations ago, for example, majority opinion in my country was that taking Indigenous children from their families to go to Christian boarding schools was best for the child. Today, the majority opinion and even the Canadian state holds this government policy to have been a century-long genocide. Successive movements of popular political emancipation among Indigenous communities have influenced a growing number of Canadians to adopt anti-racist and reconciliatory attitudes, moral beliefs, and political goals, until they became a majority view. Canada's democratic culture, communications media, and political institutions made this social change, among many others, possible. Freedom to dissent permits flexible social change that tends overall toward greater freedom in all domains of human life.

But dissent is not emancipatory in itself. Dissent is the vehicle of delivering freedom against more authoritarian public institutions, cultural norms, and moralities. Dissent and its language of righteousness can also be a vehicle for regressive and destructive movements. We see this in QAnon adherents who harass left-wing political activists and celebrities because they "believe they are in an information war . . . against a sinister cabal of satanic pedophiles, and that there will be a great reckoning when these evil deep state actors will be rounded up, arrested and executed."¹ QAnon ideology is complicated, but its core is a Christian apocalyptic movement that seeks and justifies violence against political progressives. This and other fascist movements in liberal democratic societies oppose their mainstream, adopt a similarly righteous tone as progressive movements, and promise emancipation from oppressive forces. Yet this dissent is a movement of violence, often against vulnerable people. Occupy Wall Street and the Freedom Convoy manifested as twisted mirrors of each other, but their content and nature could not have been more different. The fact of opposing the mainstream is no guarantee of value.

Look one way, and it appears that we face the familiar liberal paradox of tolerance. If a liberal state and social order must tolerate all political perspectives, then it must tolerate even a fascist political movement that seeks to destroy liberalism and use violence to crush dissenters. The paradox of tolerance: that a true liberal must tolerate and accept even the

¹ Argentino, Marc-André; Adnan Raja, Aoife Gallagher, 2022. "She Drops," 7.

Nazi. This is the ground on which I see the defenders of this radical democracy of knowledge standing. Applying the politics of democratic tolerance of all perspectives to the domain of knowledge results in their absolute openness in legitimate knowledge. Confront someone who understands and trusts vaccine science with someone who believes all vaccines are poisons. Our role as social epistemologists and philosophers of social knowledge is not to judge or justify one side over the other. It is to map their differences, the causes of those differences, and examine the logic and rhetoric with which they settle their dispute. I hope I am correctly describing what Lee Basham called a *rational polis*.

But look another way at the liberal paradox of tolerance. Nazis, colonizers, genocidaires, and other racist ideologies constitute our most popular model of a political movement that aims to crush all other politics. But it is not the only one. Consider anti-communism as a political movement seeking to end all other political beliefs. We do not often notice this other model, because in most real-life cases, racists are also anti-communists, and anti-communists tend to be quite racist. This brief description is the best I have for now: a political movement whose goal is the destruction of any belief in political equality, to shape a society without mutual obligations to ensure anyone else's dignity or public goods. These are the principles of the extreme libertarian philosophy underlying many attitudes that came to dominate right-wing politics over the COVID pandemic's first years. It is inherently anti-democratic in that democratic societies require each of us to give a little of ourselves to maintain and protect others' freedoms, dignity, and the overall public good. But anti-communism's advocates can weasel their language into democratic appearances. This is why the pandemic era's strongest resistance to public health protections craft their messages in terms of freedom. It is a take on freedom-from twisted in the constrictions of its ultimate extremity: my rights are only secured when I have no obligation to anyone else. Freedom is liberty to abandon.

A Knowledge-Weapon

If we accept that genuine freedom is the liberty to cut yourself from any obligation to another, social or moral obligations themselves restrict your liberty because they constrain how you can treat others. Obligation becomes oppression. Giving of yourself to help another is a form of self-oppression, and any responsibility toward other people in my society is a form of political oppression. Put an anti-communist in the problem position of the paradox of tolerance, and the result is curious. It is not an obviously logical contradiction, like the toleration of intolerance. But it undercuts a material condition for the possibility of social relationships and solidarity. Toleration for such an ideology accepts a force that would destroy society itself.

Histrionics aside, my argument is about a condition for the possibility of a free society. It is a sign that there are other moral and normative values that cannot be compatible with a free society, than the raw intolerance that is openly hostile to democratic obligations. Contempt for democracy comes in many forms, including the form of this very essay, which inquires into what values and personalities are incompatible with democratic social relationships. Investigating the limits of democratic openness carries a danger of slipping all too easily into anti-democracy. Advocating limits to freedom in speech and thought may appear to be a call

for censorship, for the hand of authority pressing on the mind. Yet just as threats to people lie beyond the limits of politically protectable free speech, the proper place of a threat to a society may lie beyond politically protectable opinions.

In our popular discourse, we often label as a conspiracy theory any influential idea that itself may be beyond political protection. Such ideas posit that our supposedly free world is under control of some shadowy cabal that seeks our harm for their benefit. The term is problematic for several reasons, but examining those reasons can reveal which conspiracy theories are reasonable ideas about conspiracies, and which are those notions that break any social formation in which they spread freely and grow popular. Secret plots of many kinds are ongoing all over the world. Some are benevolent, some nefarious, some unsettling, some utterly silly. Some examples of such scheming: corporate espionage agents, investigative journalists, reality television contestants, underground reproductive health care networks, mafiosi, terrorist militias, pedophile athletics coaches, petty embezzlers, surprise party organizers, state foreign intelligence officers, to name a few. But these ordinary conspiracies are not as dangerous as the framework of thinking that I'll call the bloodstained scapegoat.

This framework is common to many popular theories about conspiracies, which end up conventionally labelled 'conspiracy theories.' The Bloodstained Scapegoat: that a minority with immense hidden powers conspire to threaten violence, oppression, and control against dominant groups with institutional power and a major or plural population share; belief in the conspiracy justifies violence, oppression, and elimination against that minority. Such conspiracist accusations target minorities as the cause of the society's ills and corruption, reducing all its members to some manner of agents of the plot. Believers blame complex social problems and real political or corporate corruption on the minority: the making of the scapegoat. Accusations that the scapegoated minority is plotting great harm and violent attacks justifies the believing majority's own violent attacks and oppression of the minority. A common style is to accuse the minority of violence perpetrated among the majority's elite classes: the killers stain the scapegoat with their victim's own blood.

Which minorities the accusations target and their intensities will vary with the circumstances in which people speak the conspiracy. A staunch supporter of police institutions in the United States may be drawn to scapegoat community activists for rises in crime and drug use that may have more systemic economic and institutional causes. Westerners have long been familiar with the flexible body of accusations levelled against their countries' Jews, and the vision of the entire community as a tightly organized corporate body. Contemporary feminism has inspired whistleblowers and dissidents against the justification of incest and rape in patriarchal American Christian communities, whose leaders now deflect their own crimes upon sexual or gender minorities and their allies. Historical contingency determines who fills the places in this conspiracy framework, but the underlying logic remains the same.

Why Democracy Cannot Be Openness

If I take the stance of a democrat of knowledge, on Basham's conception, then I must not exercise any special judgement over which of these claims is worth discussing. Trust in the

rational polis is enough to make up my mind according to my own judgement, advocate for what I think is right, and let others make their own judgements accordingly. But it is no one's place to judge some idea as unworthy of any consideration at all. That would be an act of censorship that violates democratized knowledge. This perspective I simply think is too blunt a principle, which can make someone vulnerable to disingenuous manipulation. Some ways of understanding the world misidentify what matters, not as a flaw or a shortcoming, but a feature and a purpose.

The conspiracist framework of the Bloodstained Scapegoat differs from other investigations of conspiracies in an important way. Consider a claim about a controversial political leader, and how we would investigate its truth. I say that, when he was president, there are social links and regular communication between Donald Trump and influential figures in the private military sector, mercenary firms. You could investigate this in several ways: digging into phone and text message records, looking for shared meals or in-person meetings outside the White House, examining personal connections and liaisons like Michael Flynn or Roger Stone, or communications among Trump, his Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, and her brother, former Blackwater CEO Erik Prince. Figure out a timeline of meetings and communications, each point of which is confirmed with at least some of the above empirical evidence in records or testimony.

Now consider how to investigate a claim with the structure of the Bloodstained Scapegoat. One says that environmental activists are mentally deranged communists who want to destroy technological capitalist society, and are preparing an armed insurrection to do so. This is a declaration that a large, diverse group of people are imminent violent threats to society because of their fundamental beliefs. The claim is so general in its scope that you can easily maintain belief in the face of potentially falsifying evidence: no matter how many sincere environmental activists you meet, you can continue to believe that some other, secret group of them are directing their activities. That you believe is all that remains necessary to believe. On the other hand, if Roger Stone never texted, called, or met with Oathkeeper militia groups, and instead spent the Trump years drunk on taxpayer whiskey while crying in disused White House crawlspaces, then phone records, testimonies, and security footage, among other empirically verifiable records, would provide evidence. In this matter, there is history to be found.

Our most pressing problem in this concern is practical: we must trust others who do the work of investigating this history and verifying events because most of us are not able. A professional journalist can write a book that details extensively a complete narrative of political and corporate corruption, then publish and promote it because she has established enough of a career and income sources from such work that she can devote most of her working hours to it. A professional epidemiologist can run studies that process public health data, and work with patient-focussed doctors and virologists to investigate the pathology, infection vectors, and mitigations of a dangerous virus like SARS-CoV-2. Their lab can work with writers to create all manner of written, audio, and video content to explain all this. But the majority of our populace are not part of these professions. If, for example, you work in a

warehouse and deliver take-out dinners 40-50 hours each week, you don't have time to do any of this work yourself, let alone develop the professional expertise for it.

The effectiveness of journalism and science depends on the trust of the public. If a population lacks such trust in these professionals, then journalistic investigations and scientific research will be equally believable as fabrications and fascistic screeds like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, *The Turner Diaries*, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, or *Camp of the Saints*. They will simply be competing explanations of a confusing, dangerous world. If a society cannot share criteria to distinguish reliable knowledge seeking from paranoia, then all becomes paranoia, and the possibility conditions for a rational polis are absent, and perhaps broken. The ultimate test for such beliefs is real-world application: if the COVID virus is real and I do not believe it is, then I will die of premature heart failure after nine infections in four years. But the way to that final verdict is paved with destruction, and it is very difficult to convince me that such destruction is a reasonable price to pay for a democratic society. If calling out paranoid and false beliefs for the real dangers they manifest in people's actions is censorship, then one must never argue against false, dangerous, or violent beliefs. It is because of this argument that I hold the concept of censorship with which Basham smeared my original point to be untenable as a political and epistemic principle.

Presuming Good Faith

I finish these reflections wondering if my words will have the impact that I want, or indeed, any impact at all. We all write, argue, discuss, and communicate with each other because we want to change how others think. It is no imposition on your liberty to communicate with openness to changing your mind. You will not impose on others for seeking to change their minds. It could be as ordinary as what to have for lunch, consequential as choosing among houses to buy, as profound as shifting a moral principle. We would be extremely vulnerable to each other in the freedom of that openness. Creating or maintaining such a community requires, as a necessary condition, that everyone so communicate with good faith. If you are open to me, then I must be open to you.

But our society does not appear to have conditions now to maintain that kind of trust. The conversations and more formal exchanges that sparked this larger chain of articles, replies, and reconsiderations began with an argument between Lee Basham and I over the risks of spreading and discussing worrisome knowledge. We emailed each other a little when I wanted to make sure that I understood his position as well as I could. One thing we agreed on was the landmark importance of *Merchants of Doubt*. What Oreskes and Conway's work means to me, is that we cannot trust that every voice we hear speaking in controversy does so in good faith. Yet this fact does not reduce us to paranoid helplessness. *Merchants of Doubt* also described the framework of all the rhetoric that disseminates doubt and distrust to delay major economic changes for the sake of immediate-term profit pumping from a system that is destroying itself. The literature refers to the ideology as denialism. Understanding how denialist messaging works lets us develop strategies to counter its influence and argue against it, difficult though it may be.

Denialism as a public relations framework has several argumentative pillars. The one most important to my final point is manufacturing controversy and confusion over whether some key matter is settled. If every expertly-run scientific study on an issue generally agrees, then a media relations firm will elevate the work of an incompetent researcher, or simply hire their own scientists to run studies designed from conception to be shams. Friendly media personalities and producers will present mediocre or corrupt research as critiques of widely-held ideas, sincere warnings not to take the word of authorities for granted. Presenting falsehoods as truths stirs confusion, and a confused population whose solidarity is broken cannot act together. That argumentative framework was first developed to defend the tobacco industry from regulation. Exxon's first think tanks refined it to delay the oil industry's mass scaledown, and many other companies and conglomerates have since added their weight to the effort. I saw that same framework, that same style of argument, in the COVID-critical media, a denialist blitz to sow sufficient confusion and distrust quickly enough to break any public solidarity against the full restoration of capitalist productivity, no matter the viral self-destruction of the work force.

Basham acknowledged the importance of *Merchants of Doubt* in correspondence with me. But that would not seem to accord with his first arguments against my ideas on the SERRC website. My first essay in this exchange argued that public institutions, maybe climatology labs or public health ministries, could not hold the trust of people who did not understand the nature of their knowledge, how it changes, and how reliable it is. An argument that the existence of a rational polis depends on the people's education and the quality of their knowledge Basham reads as "ubiquitous, anti-rational, hierarchical censorship."² In response to my citing the research of journalist Walker Bragman into the funding sources of think tanks, lobbying firms, and public advocacy groups against COVID protections, Basham accused me of perpetuating a mere Koch Brothers conspiracy. Yet investigation into the organizers of Canada's Freedom Convoy fighting COVID protections finds them all leaders in popular advocacy groups for the oil industry. The same media agencies and research centres that Oreskes and Conway described as "merchants of doubt" about climate change adapted the environmentalist movement's community organizing techniques to build and finance popular movements against clean energy. Those same citizens' groups mobilized the Freedom Convoy as the second, successful version of 2019's United We Roll convoy which tried to occupy downtown Ottawa with trucks to end all Canadian investment in green energy.³ Contemporary journalists investigating merchants of doubt, just as Oreskes and Conway did, reveals facts about the world. Yet in the shadow of a snide allusion to George Soros, Basham alleged that the discoveries of contemporary journalists working just as did Oreskes and Conway were as illusory as a wink to the West's oldest paranoia.

Riggio's project is . . . to launch a far-reaching conspiracy theory of his own liking; that certain wealthy persons, often behind the scenes, have conspired to use their fortunes to influence the beliefs of others and in this gain some effect on public policy. This is correct. The efforts of a famous Hungarian finance tycoon are

² Basham, April 2022.

³ Enoch, October 2022.

perfectly parallel in method, if different in goals. On my last trip to Budapest I discovered George Soros was quite unpopular. Perhaps a prophet is unpopular in his own land, but I doubt this man is a prophet. He is thought to be an unwelcome and fortunately, banished manipulator. Concerns about the use of vast wealth by anyone to broadcast opinions in a democracy is natural and normal to those of us who advocate for an informed polis. The use of vast wealth to pursue influence is also normal and natural. It is not going to end anytime soon.⁴

If you trust someone, then you expect them to be sincere in what they say to you. A community cannot maintain itself as a society if its people cannot trust that each of us says what we mean. If you hear someone say they are just asking questions, then you must accept that their open mind is sincere. Otherwise, you would not be able to trust them.

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