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Jesse Walker's "Broad Church" of Conspiracy Theory: We're all Paranoids

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Wish politicians looked out for miners instead of minors on some island somewhere. ... They want to have total control, know what you think, know what you do. — Oliver Anthony

Jesse Walker’s background premise is that we are paranoiacs. The paranoid is implausible. If it’s not implausible, it can’t be paranoid when the believer knows why it is reasonable. Let’s hold that thought. I welcome Walker’s retreat. His recent SERRC piece (2023) denies he asserted the “implausibility” of conspiracy theory. But he writes, “So now we’ve gone beyond using ‘conspiracy theory’ to mean implausible theory, whether or not it involves a conspiracy”.<sup>1</sup> We’ve gone beyond? The phrase “conspiracy theory” *itself* is being used to mean “implausible theory, whether or not it involves a conspiracy”. So, we’re left with “conspiracy theories are implausible” and a long list of other theories of other kinds are, too. Walker dedicated a book to casting the human race as paranoids, so whatever he did or did not mean in his recent SERRC contributions, there is a longer paper trail to review. Let’s turn to Walker’s accusation that conspiracy theory is a universal “paranoia”, the irrational fear of others; coast to coast, culture to culture.

## Culture Studies

Whatever Walker’s actual views, he is now reticent. He’s known for his work in culture studies, where he takes a dim if entertaining view of conspiracy theories. The pattern is simple: Announce a conspiracy theory from some other decade or century, make it seem like an attempt at public mania of some kind, and then announce it has been “debunked” or lacks any credible evidence, after offering significant credible evidence for its truth. In his *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (2013)<sup>2</sup> this self-defeating pattern continues for 345 pages. I recommend the text, make no mistake. It is curious in its minutiae and illustrative in its writing strategy.

In *The United States of Paranoia* (hereafter *USP*) we find a Dallas Texas phone-book sized list of bizarre conspiratorial accusations, some so comical that your wife bursts into your study demanding to know what you are laughing about. For instance, “Homosexual International”. ... Roscoe Hillerkoetter, warned the House committee that ‘perverts in key positions’ formed ‘a government within a government.’ ... civil service homosexuals ‘belong to the lodge, the fraternity. One pervert brings other perverts into an agency, they move from position to position, and advance them usually in the interest of furthering the romance of the moment.’<sup>3</sup> Let’s not bother with islands. Then we turn to 9/11. We are told people think, perhaps to this day, the Biblical character Satan revealed his face in the smoke.<sup>4</sup>

Such are conspiracy theorists. Face finders. Jesus revealed in a tortilla? We might hope so. But I’m not sure this comes near a thoughtful “broad church” approach. It’s akin to

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, Jesse. 2023. “When Is a Conspiracy Theory a Conspiracy?” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12 (7): 20–22, page 21.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, Jesse. 2013. *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*. Harper Perennial. Hereafter, *USP*.

<sup>3</sup> *USP*, 81.

<sup>4</sup> *USP*, 334.

mocking modern biology with Lysenko. This is Walker's gift. Find the clowns and ignore the historic political and economic mass psycho-killers. Even if some are one and the same. The entertainment value is undeniable, but it isn't sound epistemology.

Culture studies often make for interesting exercises in mental manipulation, so addicted are we to story lines, even, and more so, in the hands of a teacher with an establishmentarian ruler; "powers and principalities" perhaps. What's good about the situation? First, Walker openly endorses an anti-pejorative definition of conspiracy theories as simply referring to conspiracy as a cause of events. Second, he also admits he has no empirical data, just a personal hunch; they are "fringe". That's fair. But we have more to consider; an entire text deriding conspiracy theories as the expressions of paranoia. This is not a religious issue, or is it? It is inclusive, though. Since well-devised and painfully dangerous conspiracies define the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we might be hesitant about this sort of remark. Is "unsupported objects in a gravitational field fall" also "broad-church"? We might suppose so. In the church of empirical science. Because Walker admits he has no empirical data at hand, like culture study literature often does, it exfoliates a list with numerous examples styled in the manner of his pathologizing narrative. In short, it's gossip.

The broad-church remark is also interesting considering the millions of women and men incinerated in the Middle Ages for "witchcraft." This was a continent-wide Catholic Church distraction from its political and moral failures, a new and ruthless way of reasserting political power and a tool to suppress critics. There's both a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory that met its match—excuse the horrific pun—with a counter conspiracy theory: The Church is conspiring against, torturing, and murdering by fire millions, for political reasons that terrorize every level of our society. These incentivize false accusation throughout ordinary life and submission and transmission lest you be accused. The population becomes the embodiment of the conspiracy against them. Sound familiar? That's real domestic terrorism.

### **An Empirical Test**

The context is *United States of Paranoia*. Who are "we"? We've seen Walker writes we think that conspiracy theories are implausible. Or at least he does. He also writes we believe many of them. Himself included, we might conclude. He might have been unclear. Let's have a test, starting with Walker.

Please respond: Which of the following are (a) implausible, (b) which are paranoid? (c) Which are both? (d) Which are neither? Why? (If he wishes, rate on a Likert scale; 1 to 7. 1 is strongly agree, 7 is strongly disagree. The rest are gradations. Please explain rating.)

1. The intentional use of numerous deceptions by the US and the British governments to gain public support for the invasion of Iraq.
2. The Gulf of Tonkin Incident never occurred and was known not to have occurred by the US Department of Defense but was used by the US government as a false flag report to justify entering the Vietnam War.

3. That African Americans were secretly experimented on in US prisons (and one wonders why African Americans are vaccine “hesitant”), that US cigarette corporations bought off scientists to convince the public that smoking is healthy.
4. That companies like DOW Chemical, Union Carbide and others routinely hid evidence they were poisoning local populations and creating “cancer clusters”. They likely still are.
5. The US Government’s claim that Arabs conspired to destroy World Trade Centers 1 and 2 (yes, this is a conspiracy theory (it’s of interest hundreds of millions or even billions people doubt it is true).
6. Pfizer Pharmaceutical Corporation intentionally hid information from the public about the real dangers of their mRNA Covid 19 vaccine, problems the US Government was aware of but also lied about (a theory that now seems indisputable as Pfizer has been forced to admit vast irregularities and omissions in their testing and reporting).
7. The US maneuvered Japan into an attack on US navel forces at Pearl Harbor to justify US entrance into WWII, particularly against Germany *via* the Axis treaty’s mutual defense obligation—a war with one is a war with all. Germany shared this obligation with Japan (a conspiracy theory fairly popular at least among Historians of WWII).
8. There was significant organized election fraud and illegalities in the conduct of the 2020 US presidential election and perhaps in the 2016 election (whether these were sufficient to effect outcomes is a separate question).
9. MK-ULTRA: Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD) mind control experiments were secretly conducted by scientific teams of the US government and other leading powers, including the USSR.
10. The US and other nuclear weapon powers intentionally hid the dangers of nuclear weapons test fallout from those downwind of the test and actively, knowingly lied about the real and inevitable carcinogenic effects of exposure (for instance, this is particularly well evidenced in the US states of Nevada and Utah).
11. Sexual partners [name person] with the intentional cooperation of their friends, sometimes hide sexual infidelities.
12. Some employees intentionally conspire to steal from businesses [name business] or to hide knowledge of thefts by others from [name business] in a cooperative “one hand washes the other” scheme.

13. Epstein did not kill himself, nor was he murdered, he is alive and well, conducting business as usual. Such is the power of video surveillance, multiple servers and blackmail. Guards turned off the cameras, made reality clear to the guards and escorted Epstein to his limo. Epstein and his pedophilic imitators prosper with growing success given the new supply of “product” from South of the border. They supply it to the political class at the highest levels.

14. Walker is paid by *Reason Foundation* to attempt to dismiss conspiratorial corruption in our current and future corporations and political administrations by mocking the rational roots of these accusations. The foundation and the author conceal this. *Reason* has been co-opted by wealthy donors. (This appears to be true).<sup>5</sup>

15. Walker visited...Okay, let's have a sense of humor. But 14 is of concern. The *Reason Foundation* appears to have been co-opted by establishmentarianism, and probably well paid. Otherwise, why would they abandon their libertarian principles?

All of these are conspiracy theories. None should strike us as “paranoid”—granted, the last two are gratefully obscure. I look forward to Walker's responses to each. Without such, we have little idea what he really thinks and why. He is recused from 14. So what is his epistemology? What explains back-turning on tragedy?

### **History Verses “Paranoid Story”: Prior Probability of Conspiracy**

Prior probability is the point that when an institution or group of institutions have been shown to be corrupt, there is a significant prior probability they will continue to be so, as they evolve to escape or survive detection. One tool deployed is political piety. That was then but this is now when there is no significant reason to think, for instance, that a dominant Mafia has changed its ways. They are good fellows. Compared to the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now our 21<sup>st</sup>, Walker's approach to conspiracy theory may seem a detached, dismissive, blasé, even comedic distraction. The laugh or cry syndrome comes to mind. Given our history, this is forgivable; political pieties loom large, so on a psychological defense level, we can understand his dismissiveness. Still, we need to encourage, not evade. My historian friends are uncomfortable with the phrase “history repeats itself”. On one level, they joke that's an academic job-killer. But they admit, insist, more general patterns do echo, and one way of saying this is “history rhymes”.

Are conspiracy theories implausible, paranoid explanations? Walker's book, “*The United States of Paranoia*” seems an attempt to cement that position. Either *paranoia* is not “irrational fear of others”, which would vanish tens of thousands of pages of professional psychological literature, or paranoid conspiracy theories are a United States pathology. More generally, all

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<sup>5</sup> See, <https://www.influencewatch.org/non-profit/laura-and-john-arnold-foundation/> as well as [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reason\\_Foundation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reason_Foundation).

humans, including you, the reader. You are all “paranoids” by the rules of your paranoid culture. This is the thesis of Walker’s book.<sup>6</sup> You are the pathology.

This is an antiquated but still occasional tactic, one much discussed and criticized in the epistemic literature. Imagine a compendium of conspiracy “stories” is brought together and portrayed as mental illness: The label “stories” or “tales” by implication makes them suspect, implausible; fiction. I have a stack of them in my kids’ rooms. The “paranoid” thesis entails implausible (because paranoid) *stories*. We are looking at manipulative language. Pathologizers like Walker often fall into this trap; they unknowingly pathologize themselves and then invite the rest of us to stay on their Titanic. When a human tries to dehumanize an entire species—their own—by arguing we are a pack of paranoiacs, I think we know what time it is. Walker writes, illustrating the self-defeating pattern mentioned above and in an attempt to create a paralyzing cognitive dissonance, “As long as our species exists so will paranoia. . . . We should be skeptical, yes, of people who might be conspiring against us. But we should be skeptical—deeply, deeply skeptical—of our fearful, fallible selves.”<sup>7</sup> Deeply, deeply? This is the fallacy of *special pleading*. No, we shouldn’t. Because, *contra* Walker, we are not paranoiacs.

## Conclusion

Conspiracy theory is still the object of ritual suppression, albeit ineffective. In conspiracy theory we’re not looking at irrational fear, rather the opposite. The dangers of political piety are real. History is clear. Conspiracies on a corporate and governmental level feed cemeteries; wars, poverty and suicide by the millions. To mock this as paranoia is immoral. To try to dilute it across continents is self-refuting. Conspiracy theories and orderly political action verses the conspiracies they posit is the only antidote. This is social epistemology in motion. In discussing conspiracy and his fledging street corner encounter with conspiracy, Dave Chappelle was told, when he realized the cards were marked, “Never come between a man and his money.” But the stakes are much higher here. Chappelle would agree.

There is a difference between what a conspiracy theory is as such, and then, post-definitional responses; add-ons. Is conspiracy theory as such probably implausible or all too intelligible? We have to define “conspiracy theory” to defame it, praise it or what have you. That means we have to turn to History. Walker doesn’t address this in his comments. But to explicitly describe rational public concerns as paranoid is paranoia, and unfair to the rest of us who do not share this disorder. In a break-through moment of clarity, that a well-known coffee and cream self-help organization might recognize, Walker offers, “So let me stress this: *I don’t have any reason to think Americans are unusually prone to political paranoia* . . . but then adds, “every country’s conspiracy *stories* [italics added] reflect that country’s culture. There is an American style of paranoia.”<sup>8</sup> A planet of paranoids. That said, paranoia is irrational fear. Historians disagree; our shared concerns are rational. Shall we visit Arlington? Let’s take a walk and read some tombstones.

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<sup>6</sup> *USP*, 344.

<sup>7</sup> *USP*, 338.

<sup>8</sup> *USP*, 344.

Walker ends *The United States of Paranoia* with acknowledgements, “It took a vast conspiracy to write this book” and lists a great number of names who helped him write it, none of whom are epistemologists.<sup>9</sup> A conspiracy is an organized attempt at deception. “R. U. Serious” is a guiding light on his list.<sup>10</sup> If this is 21<sup>st</sup> century scholarship by the *Reason Foundation*, it’s self-satire.

Another name catches our attention, “Psyche Lamplighter”. It’s a character in a comic book.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *USP*, 347.

<sup>10</sup> *USP*, 347.

<sup>11</sup> *USP*, 347.