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Creative Misreadings

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Lee Basham’s article is wildly inaccurate.<sup>1</sup> I do not mean that he has marshaled poor arguments against my positions; I mean that the positions he is arguing against are not mine in the first place. He attributes opinions to me that I have never held, that often are the exact opposite of views I have repeatedly stated.

To quickly review: My earlier reply to Basham gently corrected his supposition that I “might think conspiracy theory is by nature implausible.”<sup>2</sup> No, I explained; I do not think that. He now reacts by declaring this a “retreat” from my earlier position, and then by devoting more than 2,000 words to insisting that I do in fact have a history of treating conspiracy theories as innately implausible. “There is,” he writes, “a longer paper trail to review.”

I do have a long paper trail on this subject, as I have been writing about conspiracy theories for about three decades.<sup>3</sup> Basham’s new essay mostly presents itself as a discussion of *The United States of Paranoia*, a book I published in 2013.<sup>4</sup> But calling this a “discussion of *The United States of Paranoia*” is like calling *Citizen Kane* “the holiest text of Islam” or “a story about some hobbits and a magic ring.” To illustrate how bad Basham’s summary is, the best approach is probably just to contrast some quotes from his article with quotes from the book he is purportedly describing:

Basham:

The [book’s] 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.

Walker:

I’m not out to espouse or debunk any particular conspiracy theories. It would be absurd to deny that conspiracies can be real. Spies, terrorists, and mafias all exist. Alger Hiss really did engage in espionage for the Soviet Union. The Central Intelligence Agency really did plan a series of coups and

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Basham, “Jesse Walker’s ‘Broad Church’ of Conspiracy Theory: We’re all Paranoids,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12 (8): 48–53.

<sup>2</sup> Jesse Walker, “Defining ‘Conspiracy Theory’: A Reply to Lee Basham,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12 (8): 10–11 and Lee Basham, “Walker and the Fiction of Conspiracy Theory as ‘Fringe,’” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12 (7): 39–47.

<sup>3</sup> For an early example, see Jesse Walker, “Conspiracy Is As Conspiracy Does,” *Liberty*, July 1995. A sample: “To some pundits, of course, *any* critique of power is itself a paranoid conspiracy theory. No distinction is made between naive references to the Trilateral Commission as a modern Illuminati and intelligent critiques of Trilateralism as an overt, non-secretive brand of elitism. No distinction is made between improbable tales of one-worlder cabals and legitimate fears of global concentrations of power. In these pundits’ worldview, any critique of elites is paranoid—and any claim that issues from those elites is not.” Re-reading this article now, I can see places here and there where I wish I had expressed myself more precisely, but the basic themes are in line with what I have written since.

<sup>4</sup> He does briefly touch on one of my earlier *SERRC* articles, quoting a sentence where I say “we’ve gone beyond using ‘conspiracy theory’ to mean implausible theory.” In context, this clearly was not a statement of how I prefer to use the phrase but a criticism of how other people sometimes use it.

assassinations. At the very moment that you're reading this, someone somewhere is probably trying to bribe a politician. The world is filled with plots both petty and grand, though never as enormous as the ancient cabals described in the most baroque conspiracy literature.

It will sometimes be obvious ... that I think a conspiracy story is untrue. There will also be times, particularly in chapter 7, when I discuss conspiracy stories that clearly were true. Often a theory will have elements of truth and elements that are more fanciful. But this is ultimately a history of the things people believe, not an assessment of whether those beliefs are accurate.<sup>5</sup>

Basham:

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.

Walker:

I hope it's obvious that I'm using the word *paranoia* colloquially, not clinically. But it's worth stressing the point, because there's a long history of people using psychiatric terms to stigmatize political positions they oppose ...<sup>6</sup>

Basham:

Pathologizers like Walker often fall into this trap; they unknowingly pathologize themselves.

Walker:

By the time this book is over, I should hope it will be clear that when I say virtually everyone is capable of paranoid thinking, I really do mean virtually everyone, including you, me, and the founding fathers.<sup>7</sup>

Basham:

This is Walker's gift. Find the clowns [that is, the most easily mockable conspiracy theorists] and ignore the historic political and economic mass psycho-killers.

Walker:

This one is tricky. My book has plenty of references to real-world crimes committed by powerful people, but which one should I quote? There's a pretty long section on COINTELPRO,<sup>8</sup> so that would be the most obvious place to go. But

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<sup>5</sup> Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*, HarperCollins, 2013, 17–18.

<sup>6</sup> *United States of Paranoia*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> *United States of Paranoia*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> *United States of Paranoia*, 157–163, with periodic returns to the subject throughout the chapter.

since Lee listed a bunch of conspiracy theories that he says he'd like to know my views about, maybe it would be better to zero in on one of those. Since he wonders whether I believe in MKULTRA, for example, I could quote the book's description of MKULTRA.<sup>9</sup> Or since he brings up covert experiments on African Americans, I could point readers to the discussion of that very topic (and of related subjects, such as coercive sterilizations of black patients).<sup>10</sup>

I might then point out that when I write about some of the less plausible conspiracy theories that have passed through the black community, I show how even these are rooted in those real abuses. That is, after all, one of the central themes of the book: that a conspiracy theory that catches on “says something true about the anxieties and experiences of the people who believe and repeat it, even if it says nothing true about the objects of the theory itself.”<sup>11</sup>

But I promised a quote, and so I will deliver a quote:

There was nothing like the direct experience of COINTELPRO, CHAOS, and the local equivalents run by Red squads to instill a deep distrust of the government. It was easier to imagine the president ordering a break-in at the Democratic National Committee if you knew that the FBI had repeatedly broken into the offices of organizations devoted to political protest. For that matter, it was easier to think that the government might have murdered Martin Luther King or Malcolm X if you knew that the Chicago cops and FBI had assaulted and killed Fred Hampton and Mark Clark of the Black Panther Party. Documented misbehavior inevitably fueled speculations about undocumented misbehavior.<sup>12</sup>

In short, I wrote a book that deliberately refrains from framing itself as a series of debunkings; that argues we're all capable of conspiracy thinking precisely because I'm *against* pathologizing conspiracy believers; and that goes out of its way to point out not just that real-world conspiracies exist, but that false or unlikely conspiracy beliefs are often built on experiences of genuine oppression. The entire book, I should add, is shot through with distrust for powerful institutions<sup>13</sup>—another one of its central themes is that some of the most genuinely destructive conspiracy theories in history have been those promoted by ruling elites. Basham's description of the book is not merely untrue; it is backwards.

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<sup>9</sup> *United States of Paranoia*, 164–165.

<sup>10</sup> *United States of Paranoia*, 128–130.

<sup>11</sup> *United States of Paranoia*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> *United States of Paranoia*, 162.

<sup>13</sup> That's been a theme of my conspiracy-related writing for a long time too. Here is another passage from that 1995 *Liberty* article: “The dissenters...are not simply scapegoating the state; they have legitimate reasons to fear it. Waco and Ruby Ridge were not aberrations. Government agencies have shown their contempt for life and liberty on countless recent occasions: civil-forfeiture larcenies, harassment of homeschoolers, FDA raids on health food stores, ATF assaults on law-abiding gun owners, INS harassment of Hispanics, BIA abuses of American Indians, local police corruption and brutality. Anyone who wonders why so many Americans have come to fear their government need look no farther than the corpses of Donald Scott, Vicki Weaver, Malice Green, and David Koresh.”

That isn't an exhaustive list of the things Basham has gotten wrong, but I hope it's enough to show how unreliable a narrator he is. I suppose I could get into the weeds and explain, say, why it is neither "cognitive dissonance" nor a "fallacy" to point out that we should be both wary of potential conspirators and aware of our own fallibility, but I trust the readers of the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* are smart enough to understand that already. And if people are curious about why the pseudonym R.U. Sirius appears in my book's acknowledgements, it does not take much effort to find the page of the book where I both quote Mr. Sirius and mention his real name.<sup>14</sup> (As for Psyche Lamplighter: That is a pseudonym used by an editor of the neopagan journal *Green Egg*, who kindly helped me track down an old article from that publication.<sup>15</sup> I am not sure what I am supposed to conclude from the fact that Lee has also spotted the name in a comic book.)

But I guess I should state for the record that the inane conspiracy theory Basham has cooked up about myself and my employer is false. And perhaps I should say something about the phrase "conspiracy stories," if only because that might move us past the task of clearing up the mess of mistakes that Lee has left on the floor and let us return to the topic of the language we use when writing about conspiracy theories.

I often use the term "conspiracy stories." Basham objects to this:

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.

Needless to say, to call something a story is not to imply it is fiction. (When a news anchor says "our top story tonight," does Basham think he is warning us not to believe the report?) Indeed, if you look back at the very first quote from *The United States of Paranoia* at the beginning of this article, you'll see that it includes the words "conspiracy stories that clearly were true." I obviously was not using the phrase in the way Basham imagines.

So why do I use "conspiracy stories"? Because it is broader than "conspiracy theories." It *includes* conspiracy theories, but it also extends in one direction to include narratives that are undeniably true, and it extends in the other direction to include narratives that no one believes: conspiracy-themed movies, novels, games, and so on. And *The United States of Paranoia* discusses all three of those—true conspiracies, speculative conspiracies (some plausible and some not), and conspiratorial pop culture—and examines how each has influenced the others. I recommend the term to anyone else trying to take a wide angle on these phenomena.

I apologize to the reader for devoting this much attention to an essay that probably does not deserve it. If nearly everyone misconstrues your argument in the same way, there's a good

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<sup>14</sup> *United States of Paranoia*, 297.

<sup>15</sup> It is the source of the Isaac Bonewits quote on page 195.

chance that you have expressed yourself poorly. But if just a handful of people adopt a misinterpretation, it's more likely that they are reading poorly. *The United States of Paranoia* has been out for 10 years now, and offhand I can remember only one time that someone misread it in a way that resembles Basham's bizarre summary—and that guy eventually confessed that he had not yet finished the first chapter. Whatever the problem might be here, I don't think it is on my end.