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15

Trust No One?

The (Social) Epistemological Consequences of Belief in Conspiracy Theories

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0. Introduction

The National Security Agency (NSA) spies on us. Before Edward Snowden leaked classified information in 2013, which confirmed this claim, many would probably have shrugged it off as a "mere" conspiracy theory. What about now? Is the theory that the NSA spies on us still a conspiracy theory, now that it is a widely held (and apparently well-evidenced) belief?

It seems common to think that it's not. Accordingly, that Caesar was murdered by a conspiracy of Roman senators, or that 9/11 was the outcome of a conspiracy among members of al-Quaeda does not make these historical accounts conspiracy theories. For many, the latter requires that there is an element of speculation, perhaps paranoia in the belief of such theory.

However, most philosophers who work on conspiracy theories disagree with that common understanding of the term. They find it hard to identify features that make conspiracy theories an intrinsically bad explanation type, in part because some initially suspicious conspiracy theories (like, perhaps, the theory that the NSA is spying on us) later turned out to be true, in part because the deficient features of some stereotypical conspiracy theories are not shared by other stereo-typical conspiracy theories. Instead, these philosophers argue that "conspiracy theory" should be defined widely: *a conspiracy theory is the explanation of an event that cites conspiring agents as a salient cause* (Dentith 2014). Consequently, we are all conspiracy theorists. Everyone who believes that some historical event came about thanks to the successful secret collaboration of several individuals believes in a conspiracy theory and thus is a conspiracy theorist, and surely everyone believes this of some event.

Since some of these accounts are true and known to be true (e.g. that the assassination of Caesar was due to a conspiracy), believing in a conspiracy theory as such can't be irrational or misguided. In principle, then, there is nothing wrong with conspiracy theories or belief in such theories. Of course, sometimes

conspiracy theories are mistaken and sometimes they are believed on the basis of insufficient evidence, but that is the possible fate of every theory (Dentith 2017). There is nothing that makes conspiracy theories particularly irrational, doubtful, or fishy, just because they are conspiracy theories.

Accordingly, attempts by psychologists and sociologists to investigate the psychological and social profile of conspiracy believers might be seen as nothing but a witch-hunt. In a recent public statement, a group of social epistemologists and sociologists even argues that such witch-hunt endangers our (development towards an) open society (Basham and Dentith 2016, 13):[1]

> [W]e believe that it is not conspiracy theorizing that is the danger, but rather the pathologizing response to conspiracy theories.
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> The antidote to whatever problems conspiracy theories present is vigilance, not some faux intellectual sophistication which dismisses conspiracy theories out of hand. It's really quite simple when you think about it: conspiracy theorizing is essential to the functioning of any democracy, or indeed any ethically responsible society.

The argument behind it is that conspiracy theorizing keeps the public in critical control of the people in power and might prevent the latter from doing serious harm. Such critically minded citizens should be interested in developing an even more open society with institutions that exercise mutual control, one might add, because that's what makes conspiring much harder.

Consider our opening paragraph again. Some years ago people who'd have claimed that the NSA spies on us would have been ridiculed as conspiracy theorists, while in fact they were right. We shouldn't be critical of conspiracy theorists, because if we had taken their scepticism seriously, we might have learned much sooner that the NSA is spying on us. Perhaps more of that conspirational scepticism would have been better for our society, because it could have strengthened democratic institutions (for example, institutions that control the NSA). An argument of that kind is suggested in (Clarke 2002, 148):

> The prevalence of conspiracy theories confers a third benefit upon us, which is that it helps to maintain openness in society. Government agencies have a tendency to be less than forthcoming with information that might prove embarrassing to them but that the public would prefer to have made available. The information gathering activities of conspiracy theorists can help to prevent such secretiveness.

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[1] The cited paper is signed at the end by Matthew Dentith, Lee Basham, David Coady, Ginna Husting, Martin Orr, Kurtis Hagen, and Marius Raab.

So, is conspiracy theorizing not actually a danger to our current political system, but rather a force for good?

We believe that these philosophers and sociologists are right in thinking that the problem with (certain) conspiracy theories is not their explanation *type*, and that the fault of conspiracy theories needs to be identified on a case by case basis in the many ways in which people make mistakes when theorizing. But from that it doesn't follow that unleashed conspiracy theorizing in a society and a general conspirational scepticism are forces for the good or that we should welcome them in the interest of an open society and its institutions.

On the contrary, indiscriminate and pervasive conspiracy theorizing is a danger to the institutions of an open society, and this can be shown on the basis of social epistemological considerations alone.

In any case, it can already be made plausible on the basis of empirical evidence. We just need to take a look around at countries that were on a path to open, democratic societies with separation of power, freedom of speech, etc. and in which conspiracy theories have played a significant role in political campaigns that led to political change. The examples we have in mind are Turkey, Hungary, Poland, and the USA. In all these cases, the political change induced was then not at all towards a general strengthening of the institutions of open societies so that these could better exercise mutual control. On the contrary, the change was towards a mutilation of these institutions and a development away from an open society towards a closed society that displays elements of an autocracy.

Now, obviously, in all these cases there is a variety of factors that came together and led to the particular political development. We don't want to argue that it is only or even primarily due to conspiracy theorizing that these countries got off the path to an open society. But we do want to argue that conspiracy theorizing has been a causal factor in this process. There is a social epistemological explanation for the turn these societies took.

In Section 1 of this chapter, we will briefly revisit the discussion over the nature of conspiracy theories as such. We will argue that even if there is no simple definition of conspiracy theories as an explanation type that would entail that conspiracy theories are always deficient theories (and thus irrational to believe), this is still a far cry from having in any sense vindicated conspirational thought, let alone the belief in conspiracy theories in Western democracies.

In Section 2, we will characterize the social-epistemological predicament that individuals in a modern, complex society find themselves in, and how they depend on relatively stable trust-networks in order to benefit from the knowledge that is generated by the institutions of these societies.

In Section 3, we will show that belief in false conspiracy theories disrupts such trust networks and detaches the conspiracy theorist effectively from the knowledge sources in her social environment. Instead of a wide trust-network, she will, typically, be left with only a few personal trust relations, relations that can—and

very often are—exploited by enemies of open societies. Hence, in contrast to what many philosophers and sociologists who work on conspiracy theories seem to believe, conspiracy theories as such do not serve an important and in any sense positive function in open societies.

In Section 4, we will consider objections to our analysis. Is it really the case that conspiracy thinking is only of possible negative impact for open societies? Aren't there also benefits that we have overlooked? We will argue that it is difficult to contain the scepticism that conspiracy theories encourage. Once that scepticism begins evolving, spreading false conspiracy theories become a serious threat to the institutions of open societies and we need to find strategies to diminish their destructive influence. To conclude, in Section 5, we will discuss some options of what such strategies could look like.

1. Are Conspiracy Theories always Irrational?

As we said above, ordinary usage of the term 'conspiracy theory' and also much of academic usage of the term (at least beginning with Hofstadter 1965) implies that conspiracy theories are false and irrational to believe. Labelling a belief a conspiracy theory expresses that the belief is not worth being taken seriously and only held on irrational, presumably paranoid grounds. Accordingly, people who try to defend the view that a certain event or phenomenon (say, 9/11 or the frequency and duration of contrails) is due to a conspiracy often make their point by emphasizing that their belief is *not* a conspiracy theory.

Furthermore, conspiracy theories are widely considered to be a fringe phenomenon and why people believe such theories is a matter for psychologists to find out. Many psychologists who work on conspiracy thinking seem to agree that conspiracy theories can only be held irrationally, since they almost never inquire into the reasons for why their participants have conspiracy beliefs and instead immediately look for psychological profiles which anyone with a conspiracy belief would share (Cohnitz 2018).

But this attitude seems ill-founded. First of all, for a long time conspiracy theories used to be widely held and were considered a legitimate way of making sense of the social world. As Butter (2018) argues, it is only since roughly the 1960s that conspiracy theories became marginalized and disappeared from mainstream social discourse in Western societies.[2] Thus, unless one is prepared to

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[2] According to Butter, conspiracy theories presuppose certain assumptions about the effectiveness of human action, a certain understanding of time, and a public in which they can be disseminated via texts or other media. We can then find early conspiracy theories in ancient Athens and Rome and a conspiracy culture starting from the sixteenth century onwards (Butter 2018). At around that time the terms "conspiratio" and "conspiracy" become important elements of political discourse (Zwierlein and de Graaf 2013) . Conspiracy theories remained influential until far into the twentieth century.

defend that quite recently a major cognitive development took place, conspiracy theories can't be *that* irrational. And, indeed, typical conspiracy theories don't seem to be internally inconsistent or incoherent.

This would still allow that conspiracy theories are now only irrationally believable, because they rest on an assumption that everyone (in Western societies) since the 1960s knows to be false. In that way, conspiracy theories could be like miracles: for a long time, miracles (interventions into the course of nature) were rationally believable. But, as Hume argued,[3] they ceased to be believable with the advent of modern science and our knowledge of the empirical support that the (exceptionless) laws of nature enjoy. But what is it that we all learned around the 1960s that made belief in conspiracy theories irrational?

Michael Butter (2018) picks up an idea—often attributed to Karl Popper—that we learned from modern sociology that social events can't be the result of successful (large-scale) conspiracies. The social world is highly complex and difficult to control. Our plans seldom come out as intended and most larger social events or phenomena—even if they look as if they were designed and intended— are typically just unintended consequences of intentional actions. Thus, for Friedrich Hayek (1967) and Karl Popper (1966), a central explanation type of the social sciences are *invisible hand explanations*. Invisible hand explanations explain macro-level events and phenomena that seem intended and planned (perhaps due to their stability or their apparent optimality) as the result of intentional action at the micro level that did not aim at bringing the phenomenon or event in question about (Ullmann-Margalit 1978).

For Michael Butter, conspiracy theories (properly so called) always involve complexities (several groups of conspirators and the interaction between them) that are just practically impossible to control. Hence all conspiracy theories are false. "Real" conspiracies, in contrast, have a limited amount of conspirators and are short-lived.

But although there is certainly a substantial grain of truth in the idea that conspiracy theories get the more implausible the more they require a great deal of coordination and loyalty among a large and diverse group of individual agents, this seems to be a matter of degree and thus unfit to serve as a defining feature of "conspiracy theory" that would allow the conclusion that conspiracy theories are likely to be wrong, regardless of the specific circumstances.

Under which conditions exactly postulates a theory "too much complexity" in order to count as a conspiracy theory? This seems to depend on a variety of

A prominent example is the idea that the *Illuminati* or the Freemasons orchestrated the French Revolution.

[3] What Hume precisely argued is a matter of debate. For the range of alternative interpretations, see McGrew (2019). We merely use Hume's argument as an illustration here; we are neither committed to the correctness of our interpretation of Hume, nor to whether this is actually a good argument to establish the irrationality of belief in miracles.

contextual factors. For example, we are quite confident that a conspiracy between more than ten first-graders would be very short-lived (and collapse as soon as you bring in the candy), while a conspiracy between, say, fifty well-selected CIA agents can probably last considerably longer. Since the factors that would require specification are too numerous, a definition that would guarantee that all conspiracy theories are likely to be false, would have to read as follows:

A conspiracy theory is an explanation that cites the secret collaboration of group of agents as a salient cause, where the complexity of social coordination that is required in order to bring the explanandum about is too great to be plausible.

However,—as we just explained—what counts as "too great to be plausible" depends on a variety of empirical factors. What is the loyalty of the conspirators supposed to be grounded in? Can the conspirators be controlled by means other than appeal to their self-interest? How many of the conspirators need to know the "whole picture" and for how many conspirators is it sufficient that they only know their part of the plan? To what extent can the number of conspirators be kept to a small circle by using new (and not yet widely known) technology? How easy is it to "corrupt" controlling institutions?

Answers to these questions depend on the details of the conspiracy theory and the structure of the society in which it is supposed to apply. Some conspiracy theories will emerge as outright implausible for the reasons that Butter identifies, but for some conspiracy theories opinions might diverge about their plausibility. In these cases, whether an explanation should count as a "conspiracy theory", defined in the way above, would depend on matters other than the explanation type; it will depend on empirical questions that are perhaps not widely known and that are independent of the insights of Hayek and Popper.

Hence the definition above is perhaps a good approximation to the ordinary language meaning of 'conspiracy theory' but it is of little use for theoretical and empirical purposes, especially if the aim of the empirical work is to find out why people believe conspiracy theories and whether anything can be done about it. It seems, then, indeed more fruitful to use a wide notion of conspiracy theory (i.e. *an explanation that cites the secret collaboration of a group of agents as a salient cause*) and look at the details of the theory and the evidence provided for it, in order to assess its plausibility and likelihood.

If such a wider definition is used, then it is clear that not all conspiracy theories are irrationally believed. Of course, conspiracy theories can be unsubstantiated because they may not consider the plausibility of alternative causes for an outcome like invisible hand explanations, the possibility of coincidental relations, or unintentional failures of institutional processes. Deficient conspiracy theories may also be immunized against contradictory evidence by ad hoc assumptions or extensions of the scope of the alleged conspiracy. In short, conspiracy theories may fail

the criterion to suggest a theory that delivers the best explanation available in light of the known facts.

But, as in the case of other theories, whether a conspiracy theory is in this sense unsubstantiated is open to critical examination and consideration. And, as we have seen in the case of Snowden, the result of this check can be that a conspiracy theory is indeed proved to be the best explanation for certain events. So there seems to be a real chance that not only can conspiracy theories be true but that we also can successfully differentiate between true and false conspiracy theories.

What implications does that have for how we should deal with conspiracy theories and their believers? Does that mean that conspiracy theories are vindicated? Does that mean that we don't need to worry about these theories and their believers because a general conspirational scepticism raises the level of attentiveness and we can easily get rid of false theories?

As we have seen, philosophers such as Basham and Dentith argue that this indeed shows that the current attention that conspiracy theories receive is in fact a witch hunt. If conspiracy theories can be rationally believed and can sometimes be true, then they shouldn't deserve special attention qua being conspiracy theories. False theories should be debunked, but that holds for all types of theories. Even Michael Butter, who—as we have seen—operates with a definition of conspiracy theories on which these theories are always false, doesn't think that conspiracy theories pose a special danger to society; conspiracy theorists don't seem to be particularly violent, and some of their scepticism with regard to the establishment and elites is even healthy.[4]

In what follows, we will argue for a very different view. We will arrive at that conclusion not by contesting the view of Basham and Dentith that conspiracy theories are rationally believable, but by proposing that belief in unsubstantiated and false conspiracy theories can indeed be dangerous for open societies and their institutions. Our result is, in fact, the result of a rational reconstruction of the epistemic situation of people who believe in (false) conspiracy theories.[5] This reconstruction not only explains the consequences of beliefs in false conspiracy theories, but it also outlines why it is difficult to successfully dissuade people from adhering to objectively wrong views in this respect.

Before we get to this, it's worth reflecting, though, on the epistemic situation that citizens of a modern society find themselves in if they *don't* believe that they are targets of a conspiracy.

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[4] Butter (2018) sees the danger to democracies in the polarization of political positions and understands conspiracy theories as an expression of that polarization. As we will argue below, the polarization of modern democracies is partly *caused* by conspiracy theories.

[5] Of course, the fact that conspiracy theories are rationally believable does not mean that they are sometimes, let alone typically, rationally believed. To what extent conspiracy theorists are, in fact, nutcases is a matter of empirical research.

2. The Division of Cognitive Labour and the Role of Trust Networks

Let's reflect for a minute on the things we know and why we know them. Most of that knowledge stems from testimony. A lot of it stems from the testimony of people that we do not know personally but that we have trusted because we realized that they have the relevant expertise on the matter. We get knowledge from reading the news, watching TV, reading books, attending classes in college or school, or talking to a physician or a lawyer. The fact that we attain knowledge on the basis of what we read, see, and hear there is due to the fact that the people that certain institutions (like the media, universities, colleges, and schools) *present* as experts actually *are* experts.

Now, unless we have intimate insight into these institutions ourselves and know how journalists, scientists, lawyers, physicians, etc. work, how they are trained and selected, and what track record they have of getting things right, we are typically not in a position ourselves to evaluate whether trust in these experts is justified. But then how do we realize their expertise?

Well, typically we do that on testimony as well. We picked it up from people that we already trusted on a *personal* level—like our parents and others in our close vicinity—who told us that we can also trust these institutions and their experts. Our parents, or those others in our close vicinity had themselves, then, either direct personal reasons to trust specific experts (perhaps based on personal acquaintance) or also indirect reasons for such trust, based on the testimony of yet others. That is how we typically form our beliefs. Is it also *rational* to form beliefs like that? Fortunately, that is the case.

The trustworthiness of an informant is a matter of the interplay of at least the following factors (Baurmann 2007b):

(1) *Competence*: reliable and useful information from informants is dependent on their appropriate cognitive and intellectual abilities as well as on their external resources to identify the truth in the relevant area.

(2) *Extrinsic incentives*: benefits and costs, rewards and sanctions, recognition and contempt can motivate informants to exhaust their cognitive potential and utilize their resources to discover reliable information and transmit their knowledge to recipients. Extrinsic incentives can also tempt informants to behave opportunistically, to underachieve, to misuse their resources and to manipulate and deceive recipients with wrong, misleading, or useless information.

(3) *Intrinsic incentives*: emotional bonds of solidarity, sympathy and benevolence, the internalisation of common social values and norms, moral virtues, and personal integrity can motivate informants to transmit valuable knowledge and reliable information to a recipient. Emotional aversion

> and hatred, the internalization of deviant values and norms, moral vices, and malignance are potential reasons to deceive and cheat a recipient and to give false and deceptive testimony.

In certain situations (e.g. asking a stranger on the street for the time of the day), assessing the reliability of an informant might be relatively easy and not require deep insight into the factors just mentioned. In other areas, the situation may be far more complex. Gathering evidence about competence, and extrinsic and intrinsic incentives is far too costly for most cases of information transfer. In these situations it is rational to use *heuristic rules* in order to assess the trust-worthiness of your information sources. For example, we rely on certifications from approved educational institutions or from employment in professional institutions as indicators of scientific competence and academic expertise.

How do we know that these heuristic rules are reliable? Certainly not on the basis of our own experience alone. For some sciences that are in direct contact with technology, we can, to some extent, assess the trustworthiness of that science's expertise. Airplanes mostly fly, ill persons are often cured, etc. But laypeople are already not able to assess on the basis of their individual experience whether, say, being a certified practitioner of homeopathy promises a better track record in curing diseases than a university degree in standard medicine. Even if the sciences make sometimes *exoteric* claims that can in principle be assessed without expert knowledge (in contrast to *esoteric* claims that cannot be so assessed), individual experience of the track record of a science or discipline with respect to these exoteric claims comes typically nowhere near a sufficient empirical basis for assessing the reliability of that science. If a society has know-ledge of that track record via exoteric claims, then this knowledge is *distributed* knowledge. Again, it would be irrational to try to gather that evidence that justifies our reliance on heuristic rules ourselves.

But this seems to put us in a dilemma: on the one hand, we are extremely and unavoidably dependent on the testimony and the knowledge of experts in our society; on the other hand, the same unavoidable and irreducible dependence on testimony reoccurs for knowing which experts we can so trust. How can we break out of this predicament?

In the real world, we do this via relations of *personal trust*. We learn, on the basis of our own experience, that we can trust our parents and they inform us that we can trust our school teacher and our family doctor. They can provide us with this information because they stand in personal trust relations to others that have made the relevant collective experience. From their own, and the personal experi-ence of others in their network, they assess whether these potential epistemic authorities "know what they are talking about" and which heuristic rules are reliable. The wider the network on which this assessment is based, the more

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Dictionary : OUP_UKdictionary   343

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accurate this assessment will be.[6] Over the years, we learn ourselves whom to personally trust and widen our trust-network. We also develop heuristics for assessing the trustworthiness of people with which we only have short-term interactions.

The more individuals I trust personally, the broader the potential reservoir of independent information and knowledge from which I can draw to judge the validity of social rules and criteria for the credibility and trustworthiness of people, institutions, and authorities. This judgement would also involve reference to testimony to a large extent—but it is testimony from sources whose quality I can evaluate myself. Therefore, I can ascribe a high *trust-value* to the testified information.

I will also be inclined to ascribe a high trust-value to information which stems from sources whose trustworthiness is not approved by myself, but by the testimony of people I personally trust. In this way it is possible to profit from a more or less widespread network of personal trust relations which is linked together by people who trust each other personally and thus simultaneously function as mutual trustintermediaries (Coleman 1990, 180). Such trust-networks pool information and knowledge and make them available for the individual at low costs or even for free. Thus they represent important instances of "social capital" (Baurmann 2007a).

The efficiency of personal trust-networks as information pools is enhanced if they transgress the borders of families, groups, communities, classes, or nations. The more widespread and the larger the scope of trust networks, the more diverse and detailed the information they aggregate. The possibility of individuals getting from their trust-networks the quality and quantity of information they need to form a realistic and balanced picture of their world is, therefore, largely dependent on the coverage their trust-networks provide.

Trustnetworks can remain latent and silent about the established social criteria for epistemic credibility and authority for a long period. Their special importance becomes evident when, for example, under a despotic regime a general mistrust towards all official information prevails. But personal trust-networks also provide fallback resources in well-ordered societies with usually highly generalized trust in the socially and formally certified epistemic sources. Under normal circumstances in our societies we consult books, read newspapers, listen to the news, and pay

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[6] The success of this mechanism requires (amongst other things) that reliable knowledge is indeed generated in the society in question and that there is a recognizable and substantial track record of that knowledge. For example, in a small tribe the local shaman is an epistemic authority even though he or she is a charlatan—simply because there is no competition with other, more trustworthy and reliable epistemic authorities. Likewise, it may be hard for outsiders to identify who is right in phases of scientific revolution. The new and better paradigm might not yet have a track record that would allow non-experts to recognize its superiority over the old.

attention to our experts and authorities if we want to learn something about the world. And even when we develop mistrust in some of our authorities or institutions, we normally do so because we hear suspicious facts from other authorities or institutions.

However, from the subject's point of view, the ultimate touchstone of my belief in testimony can only be my own judgement. Even if I'm ready to defer my judgement to an epistemic authority, *I* must recognize that authority. And it makes a great difference for the reliability of that judgement whether I can base this judgement only on my own very limited personal information or if I can fall back on the information pool of a widely spread network which is independent of socially predetermined criteria for epistemic credibility and authority.

So, on the one hand, our society with its division of cognitive labour and its institutions that train and systematically educate highly specialized and knowledgeable experts, and that provide incentive structures and selection processes which lead to reliable and trustworthy performance of these experts, generates a lot of knowledge. However, on the other hand, this does not by itself guarantee that everyone can automatically benefit from the generated knowledge. One needs to happen to stand in a number of stable enough personal trust relations of the right kind in order to be able to get oneself to trust in the output of these knowledge-generating institutions.

After for all that most people directly know about academia, the media, and schools, and for all knowledge of facts they observe themselves and that they can use in order to verify claims made by members of these institutions, this "generated knowledge" could just be a major scam. Which brings us back to our conspiracy theorists.

3. Epistemological Effects of Belief in Conspiracy Theories

In many contemporary prevalent conspiracy theories, the relevant conspirators are many, if not all of the institutions that, in open societies, are supposed to exercise mutual supervision and control. Big pharma lobbies politicians and pays scientists and the media to convince everyone else that vaccinations are beneficial and pretty harmless to the recipient, in order to make a profit.

For most people, the reason to believe such a conspiracy theory originates from the testimony of some opinion leaders and alleged experts whom they trust as epistemic authorities in this matter—maybe because they are able to fake a special competence and personal integrity in social media or group meetings. The basis for this trust may be irrational; to believe the information from a trusted source is not.

But belief in a false conspiracy theory of this kind this has repercussions for your epistemic situation. Let us assume that you believe in a factually wrong

conspiracy theory that vaccination is harmful for the recipient but that this is covered up in the way and for the reasons described above.

The heuristic rules that the relevant institutions provide for the identification of expertise (e.g. having a scientific degree, being employed at such an institution) will then become useless to you—unless, of course, you'd see that the institutions react appropriately to the alleged fraud by firing corrupt scientists or journalists, which, of course, they don't, since your theory is false. It will also impact the way you view the rest of your trust-network. Those members of your family, or your immediate circle of friends, who initially provided a pathway to benefit from the knowledge produced by the institutions of your society are now unreliable. You don't need to think that they tried to mislead you; it is sufficient to think that they, too, have been misled. And indeed, if pressed on details of your new vaccination conspiracy theory, they don't have direct evidence that they can provide against it, right? So, they naively believed on hearsay, and you can now "enlighten" them.

Therefore, the initial and seemingly quite harmless entry into the world of conspiracy theories can trigger a dynamic mechanism that leads to a process of ongoing epistemic reinforcement of a deficient world view and, as a final result, to a cut-off from the knowledge generated in a society. The core of this social mechanism is constituted by a process of mutual influence and adaptation in which individual experiences and deliberations are continuously compared and adjusted in accordance with the experience and deliberations of other persons who are considered relevant and reliable (Baurmann et al. 2014, 2018; Betz et al. 2013).

It is crucial for an understanding of this mechanism that opinion formation involves *first-order opinions* about the issues that are relevant in a certain field—big pharma lobbies politicians and pays scientists and the media—and *second-order opinions* about the epistemic trustworthiness of persons who express their opinions about these issues—for example, opinion leaders in a peer group. Second-order opinions refer to characteristics of persons that are relevant for their quality as epistemic sources. It is essential to note that persons influence each other mutually both in the formation of their first-order opinions and their second-order opinions. They consider the opinions of other trustworthy persons with regard to the explanation of, for example, political processes and developments, as well as with regard to their estimation of who is competent and reliable to pass considered judgements over these issues.

It is an important feature of this social mechanism that it not only works in the development of first- and second-order opinions but that it also entails dynamic relations between these different layers of opinion formation. On account of this structure, persons will be influenced by other persons not only in regard to their opinions about political options, societal connections, or ideological world views. This adaptation process itself will, in turn, be intertwined with the mutual adaptation of the second-order opinions about who has sufficient or special competence to understand and judge such options, connections, or world views. These two-layer

dynamics could result in far-reaching transitions of the initial convictions of persons so that they ultimately may adopt extremist opinions which were originally not within their opinion space and may well have appeared absurd to them.

How may this mechanism work in our example? As one result of your "new" belief in the pharma conspiracy your epistemic trust in people who don't believe in the truth of your conspiracy theory will be weakened. Simultaneously, you will develop new trust in the epistemic competence of persons who share your opinion of the deceitful schemes of the pharma industry. In consequence, in the future the influence of your new epistemic friends on your opinion formation will grow and that of your old friends will decline.

This will affect your first-order opinions about the world: the new authorities in your social-epistemic peer group may strengthen your convictions about the conspiracy of the pharma industry and may transfer it to other areas of society, maybe in regard to a conspiracy between politics and the media.

But your second-order opinions will also be infected by the new influences: they may further erode your epistemic trust in your old circle of friends and present, in addition, new authorities and special experts who can "enlighten" your world view even more.

Next steps of this vicious spiral may follow: the growing circle of your new epistemic trustees will also produce a further growing influence on your first- and second-order opinions. Your conspiracy theories may get more and more radical and wide-ranging, undermining your confidence in all relevant institutions of your society. And you may terminate all your former epistemic trust-relations, beginning with your social environment and ending with a break with all the "official" epistemic authorities and sources of your society—leaving you with a close and exclusive network of a special group of believers who are conforming themselves mutually in their opinion of the factual world and other persons.

Therefore, false conspiracy theories are dangerous levers to start a dynamic downward spiral in the (epistemic) trust-relations of persons, because they evoke an initial mistrust towards societal institutions *and* towards persons who deny reasons for this mistrust. In consequence, believers of conspiracy theories will often generalize their institutional mistrust and simultaneously restrict their epistemic trust to persons who are enforcing and stabilizing this mistrust.

As a final result, you are indeed cut off from the knowledge generated in your society. Presumably you have a residual core of personal trust relations left; at least those relations with your fellow "truthers", the people who put you initially in the know about the purported large-scale conspiracy that is going on in your society. Your interest will be that none of the institutions that have failed you will get between you and those you personally trust. It will be rational for you to prefer an information-flow architecture that gives you unfiltered and immediate access to information, coming from persons to which you (believe you) stand in a direct trust relation.

This is, indeed, rational for someone who believes a false conspiracy theory, because for her it seems that the institutions that are meant to filter, mediate, or cross-check information, are all corrupt or broken. As we noted above, even though personal trust is necessary to participate in the knowledge generated in your society, your trust in its institutions is not exclusively based on testimony. For one thing, you may have direct evidence that the experts in your society can't be completely incompetent. Technology typically works and makes progress; occasionally things turn out the way that politicians promised such that you experience the consequences of that improvement yourself. But normally you also observe that when things go wrong, there are correcting mechanisms: journalists report, say, that scientists falsified their data, and politics and academia react properly. Studies are retracted; perhaps laws are implemented in order to ensure higher standards; policies that were based on the misinformation are changed; the scientists get punished or fired. Thus, in order to have trust in the institutions of your society, you don't need to believe that everything is always going well. But you need to believe that *when* things go wrong, there is a good chance that the mutual control mechanisms of these institutions will detect and correct the mistakes, and you have occasionally evidence that this indeed happens.

Now, as we already noted, in a case when you believe a *false* conspiracy theory, you'll think you have evidence that *none* of this happens. The vaccination programme doesn't stop; scientists just deny the allegations; politicians even discuss the introduction of a formal duty to vaccinate in order to force vaccination sceptics like you to comply. You can directly observe that the system is broken. Why should you want corrupt institutions to become even stronger?

If you get someone who you personally trust into power—perhaps even into a presidency—you will, therefore, not be interested in having that person's actions controlled by corrupt institutions. The influence of these institutions would need to be reduced, their political power limited, the "swamp" must be "drained". It will be rational to prefer the destruction of (what actually are) institutions of an open society. That is precisely what we can empirically observe when open societies take an autocratic turn based on unleashed and self-reinforcing conspiracy theorizing.

As we discussed above, a network of personal trust relations is your entrance ticket to the knowledge society. It is also your fallback option if the institutions of that society let you down. In this case, you will want to side-step these institutions and establish a tight network of people to whom you think you have reliable personal relations. This seems to be the empirical phenomenon we observe: generalized social trust—as we find it in open societies—is replaced by *particularist trust*.

Individuals adhere to a particularistic trust if they only trust members of a clearly demarcated group and generally mistrust members of all other groups. Particularistic trust is supported by heuristic rules which are the exact mirror image of those heuristic rules which embody a generalized trust: while rules of

generalized trust state that one should *trust* everybody unless exceptional circum-
stances obtain, rules which constitute a particularistic trust state that one should
mistrust everybody with the exception of some specified cases.

This is an epistemically limited and dangerous position. People who are thrown
back on particularistic trust can easily be manipulated and controlled. The result is
the exact opposite of the truth-generating epistemic dynamic in an open society.

These are all almost purely epistemological considerations that make dismant-
ling the structures of open societies rational, if you believe a sufficiently wide false
conspiracy theory about these structures. Thus, instead of strengthening an open
democracy and its institutions, these beliefs lead to their erosion and destruction.

4. But Is Conspiracy-Thinking Always Bad?

One objection to our discussion could be that it is too naive and one-dimensional.
Granted, there are these negative effects that are to be predicted on a rational
reconstruction of the epistemic situation of conspiracy believers, but (a) perhaps
conspiracy believers aren't *fully* rational after all and don't draw the proper
consequences that their belief should have for their generalized trust, and
(b) perhaps there are still other benefits that conspiracy-thinking may have for
open democracies. We'll briefly address both of these objections.

4.1 Are Conspiracy Believers Consistent?

(a) is indeed somewhat plausible. Conspiracy theorists are often internally incon-
sistent in their world view and may thus not see that their belief that all institu-
tions massively fail when it comes to X (say, vaccination), should also imply the
untrustworthiness of those same institutions when it comes to Y (say, whether you
can believe any other medical advice).

As Lewandowsky et al. (2018) show, climate science deniers often hold incon-
sistent views. In what Lewandowsky et al. call "contrarian discourse", one can find
over one hundred incoherent pairs of arguments (Lewandowsky et al. 2018, 184)
claiming that "future climate cannot be predicted", as well as that "we are heading
into an ice age", or that the observed CO_2 rise is actually caused by warming, as
well as that there is no correlation between CO_2 and temperature. Most of the
incoherent arguments identified are not actually endorsed by one and the same
individual, but Lewandowsky et al. can also show that some individuals endorsed
incoherent pairs of arguments at different times and different places.

Doesn't that suggest that conspiracy theorists will most likely fail to draw the
epistemological conclusions of their views (just as they often fail to draw also other
conclusions from their views)? They may simply choose to believe a convenient

(though incoherent) set of views on which they can still trust the testimony of experts and other relevant institutions as long as that information is unconnected to the (often) politically charged topics for which those same experts and institutions are thought to be corrupt and complicit in a conspiracy.

This is clearly an empirical question, and we can't answer it in the context of this chapter. However, there is some empirical evidence that seems to speak against this objection.

First of all, even though Lewandowsky et al. show that climate change deniers endorse incoherent arguments at different places or times, this does not show that these climate change deniers have—individually—an inconsistent or even incoherent set of beliefs. As Lewandowsky et al. also say in their paper, it is often precisely their conspiracy belief which provides coherence of their beliefs at a higher level:

> [A] known attribute of conspiracist thought is that it can appear incoherent by conventional evidentiary criteria. To illustrate, when people reject an official account of an event, they may simultaneously believe in mutually contradictory theories—e.g., that Princess Diana was murdered but also faked her own death. The incoherence does not matter to the person rejecting the official account because it is resolved at a higher level of abstraction; there is an unshakable belief that the official account of an event is wrong.   (Lewandowsky et al. 2018, 179)

Thus, the fact that some conspiracy theorists hold incoherent beliefs at some level does not, by itself, establish that conspiracy theorists are, in general, incoherent, and that a rational reconstruction of their epistemological situation is inapplicable.

There are two further empirical findings which suggest that our analysis is on the right track. According to our analysis, we should expect that conspiracy theorists will not only distrust the government or other epistemic authorities when it comes to one specific issue, but will show general distrust for such information-providing institutions. Thus, someone who believes one conspiracy theory should then be more likely to believe other conspiracy theories also on unrelated issues. It is a relatively stable finding in social psychology that this is indeed the case:

> One of the main research findings on this phenomenon [i.e. in belief in conspiracy theories] is that conspiracy beliefs are monological in nature: one conspiracy theory reinforces other conspirational ideas, making individuals who believe in one conspiracy theory more likely to also believe in other conspiracy theories.
> (van Prooijan and van Lange 2014, 237)

Social psychologists find that result very surprising and speculate for its explanation over a "conspiracist mindset", a particular psychological disposition to

believe conspiracy theories. However, on a rational reconstruction of the epistemic situation of conspiracy adherents, this outcome can be expected without assuming any kind of irrational disposition (cf. also Hagen 2018 for a similar result).

If you believe that a certain institution is not trustworthy because it has been corrupted, then you have reason to assign a relatively low credence to any piece of information it provides and higher credence to alternative information, stemming from presumably more trustworthy sources. This can explain why conspiracy theorists believe also other, non-related conspiracy theories and might assign a relatively high plausibility to several mutually inconsistent claims in contrast to the "official" account (cf. Bruder et al. 2013).

The relevant mechanism behind this "surprising" result is simply that you will, in general, assign a low trust value to all of the official information-providing institutions. This very mechanism can also be observed directly. In a recent study, Katherine Levine Einstein and David M. Glick (2015) exposed test subjects to a conspiracy theory by having them read an article that reported claims by Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, suggesting that the US Bureau of Labor Statistics had manipulated recently reported unemployment data for political reasons. Mere exposure to these claims affected the amount of trust that the test subjects afterwards reported for a range of governmental institutions, such as the US Census Bureau, the Food and Drug Administration, the Presidency, the local police, and local schools. Needless to say, Welch's allegations in the report didn't implicate these other institutions. Thus, it seems, institutional distrust spreads rather quickly.

There certainly need to be more studies of this kind before one can say anything definitive, but these findings support the social epistemic dynamics that we describe above and suggest that the undermining effects of conspiracy theories are, indeed, to be expected empirically.

4.2 Are False Conspiracy Theories Always Bad?

At the beginning of this chapter we said that we will oppose the view that propagating conspiracy theories is good for open societies, because they induce scepticism of the government, which will ultimately lead to a strengthening of the institutions of open societies that exercise mutual control. Then we argued that, *yes*, conspiracy theories lead to scepticism of government institutions, but *no*, rampant conspirational speculations do not strengthen institutions of open societies, and, over time, will lead to scepticism about all of them and completely undermine the kind of trust that is necessary in order to keep them functioning.

This argument leaves open whether belief in false conspiracy theories could still have *other* positive (epistemic) effects. This question is too broad to be discussed thoroughly in this chapter. However, we can give a few pointers here.

First of all, our analysis is a *rational* reconstruction. Hence, the epistemic situation that conspiracy theorists end up in, the low trust that they assign to the institutions of open societies, the comparatively high trust they assign to a small set of personal acquaintances, etc. is an appropriate response in circumstances in which their beliefs are true. Now, even belief in *false* conspiracy theories can lead to an adequate limited trust-network, if the degree of trustworthiness assigned is the same that a properly informed agent would assign in that same situation.

Let us assume that you live in a society in which the institutions that should provide information and exercise mutual control are, in fact, broken and corrupt. Let us also assume that you hold a complex conspiracy theory about these institutions: you believe that all these institutions are controlled by the New World Order (NWO). Consequently, you have little trust in these institutions and epistemically navigate on the basis of a network of personal trust relations. Let us further assume that your conspiracy theory has it all wrong; it's not the NWO that controls everything, but another organization with intentions that are very different from those that you suppose the NWO to have. In this case, you believe a false conspiracy theory, but your epistemic reaction to that is still adequate and, moreover, *objectively* adequate. From an internalist point of view you are rational with respect to your background beliefs, and you are also objectively justified when reducing your trust-network to the actual reliable core. Hence, under certain conditions, believing false conspiracy theories can indeed be epistemically beneficial.

Perhaps some of the disagreement between our overall estimate of the value of conspiratorial reasoning and that of our colleagues that we cited at the beginning of the chapter, has to do with differences in judgement about the kind of open society we actually live in. We assumed for our argument here, an open society in which the relevant institutions are largely functional and the division of cognitive labour is overall reliable. Under these circumstances, belief in unsubstantiated and false conspiracy theories and the suspicion they promote has only bad consequences. Any kind of serious conspiracy theory has, in a well-ordered open society, to accept a reversal of the burden of proof and has to present salient indicators as evidence for a malfunction of prima facie efficient and trustworthy institutions. Otherwise, a plain conspirational scepticism only undermines a virtuous equilibrium of institutional stability and institutional trust. Of course, one may have a less optimistic picture of our current society, but then our disagreement is ultimately not about the positive or negative role that conspiracy theories can play in open societies, but rather about the type of society we are in.

A relevant disagreement may concern potential other epistemic benefits that belief in false conspiracy theories may have. One might argue that false conspiracy theories, just like any other false beliefs, are to some extent epistemically beneficial, because they allow us to challenge our true beliefs and thus to arrive at a better and deeper understanding of these truths.

This argument needs more elaboration than we can provide here, hence two brief comments must suffice: (i) it is not clear that a better and deeper understanding is always preferable. We said above that belief in false conspiracy theories will cut you off from knowledge via testimony. It is in everyone's interest to know certain things merely on the basis of testimony, since we lack the time and resources to know them in any better way, and we just don't care enough to understand them fully. For example: given that building 7 of the World Trade Center collapsed as a result of the events nearby, we couldn't care less why exactly it collapsed and how the events nearby precisely caused this, and that's so for most people.

(ii) This fact doesn't change much if, instead of focusing on the first-order belief that the conspiracy theory targets, we move to the higher-order belief about the trustworthiness of our institutions. Although it might sound more plausible that it would be good if most people more deeply understood how peer review, consensus formation, and other quality control mechanisms in the sciences will lead to reliable expert opinions, most people don't care about a deep understanding of these things either, and it would be a waste of their cognitive resources to develop any expertise in these matters.

In a complex knowledge society with a cognitive division of labour, it is not necessary for everyone to know these things to profit from the knowledge generated. In order for such a society to produce reliable knowledge, some people need to exercise specific control and be sceptical and alert with respect to the institutions for which they are responsible, but this responsibility is distributed. Nobody needs to know all the details of it for the system to work, and unless someone is specifically interested in the details of the system people are not generally in an epistemically better position by knowing many details about it.

5. How to Confront Conspiracy Thinking

If the social-epistemic mechanisms that we have described in this chapter adequately represent the empirical belief and trust formation of conspiracy theorists, then we should be able to also say a thing or two about the ways in which unsubstantiated and false conspiracy theories can be successfully debunked or confronted.

Debunking deficient conspiracy theories is often seen as impossible, or at least very difficult, due to the alleged unfalsifiability of dogmatic conspiracy theories. It is often thought that deeply believed conspiracy theories are immune to falsification because any counter-evidence is automatically explained away by the conspiracy theory as evidence planted by the conspirators. But although there may be conspiracy theories which indeed assume an all-powerful group of conspirators (maybe if the conspirators are an alien race that have the power of Descartes' evil demon and can make all kinds of circumstances appear as counter-evidence for

the conspiracy theory to us), most conspiracy theories are not that all-encompassing and—at least logically—allow for falsification.

A different matter is, of course, if and when conspiracy theorists actually *change* their theories in response to counter-evidence. Very often, counter-evidence is explained away by a conspiracy theory as being planted or disseminated by members of the conspiracy. This by itself is not yet a problematic move by the conspiracy theorists. After all, her theory states that there is an ongoing conspiracy of people who don't want to be exposed. Thus, it makes a lot of sense to assume that these conspirators will do what they can in order to hide their tracks and mislead the public. However, this moves becomes problematic when this strategy of explaining away prima facie counter-evidence leads to an ad hoc extension of the assumed group of conspirators.

As an example, assume that a conspiracy theorist believes that big pharma lobbied politicians and physicians into a nationwide vaccination programme which is in fact harmful for the citizens, but makes big pharma a lot of money. In this case, official denials from the big pharma corporations that such conspiracy theories are false, will plausibly not be of much evidential weight for the conspiracy theorist as proof that she is wrong. On her theory, such denials are to be expected from the corporations that are implicated in the conspiracy.

Now, let's assume further that a group of seemingly independent journalists start investigating the matter, but come back empty-handed. As far as they could find out, there is no ongoing conspiracy and they publish articles that reject the conspiracy theories to the contrary as an unfounded witch-hunt. What, indeed, often happens is that conspiracy theorists will, in reaction to such reports, extend the group of conspirators (which thus far only included physicians and some politicians) to also include at least the journalists who claim to have investigated the matter. Such a move is typically ad hoc, in the sense that there is no independent reason to believe that the journalists are part of the conspiracy (independent from the fact that these journalists have produced this apparent counter-evidence). Such a move—ad hoc extending the group of conspirators—is not rationally warranted or licenced by the conspiracy theory as such.

As we have seen above, such moves, however, may be rational reactions in cases in which the conspiracy theory has already destroyed the foundations for generalized trust. If trust in the functioning of institutions is generally low, then not putting much trust into the institution *journalism* is not irrational or unmotivated.

But this makes *debunking* conspiracy theories especially difficult. Official pronouncements that a conspiracy theory is mistaken or crazy will not carry much weight for someone who already assigns a low trust value to the institution making that announcement. What can be done?

Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) offer a strategy that is aimed at breaking up the trust networks of the conspiracy theorists. The idea is to infiltrate—either openly or anonymously—their networks, for example via government agents

participating in the relevant chat rooms or newsgroups. Open infiltration may prove to be less promising in light of that fact that these government agents will be perceived as members of the conspiracy. Anonymous infiltration may seem more promising:

> The risk with tactics of anonymous participation is that those tactics may be discovered or disclosed, with possibly perverse results. If the tactic becomes known, the conspiracy theory may become further entrenched, and any genuine member of the relevant groups who raises doubts may be suspected of government connections. And as we have emphasized throughout, in an open society it is difficult to conceal government conspiracies, even the sort of conspiratorial tactic we have suggested, whose aim is to undermine false and harmful conspiracy theorizing.

> If disclosure of the tactic does occur, however, the perverse results are just a possible cost, whose risk and magnitude is unclear. Another possibility is that disclosure of the government's tactics will sow uncertainty and distrust within conspiratorial groups and among their members; new recruits will be suspect and participants in the group's virtual networks will doubt each other's bona fides. To the extent that these effects raise the costs of organization and communication for, and within, conspiratorial groups, the effects are desirable, not perverse.
>
> (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 225–6)

Indeed, detected anonymous infiltration will lead to further distrust within the remaining trust-network of the conspiracy theorists. However, it is not clear how that will be a remedy for the problem. Knowing that the government, which I didn't trust in the first place, anonymously infiltrated my peer network maybe destroys my peer network or the trust I put into it, but it certainly doesn't reinstate my trust in the government (on the contrary!). Thus, the anonymous infiltration tactic primarily promises to further destroy and diminish the remaining trust-networks of people believing a conspiracy theory, which we identified as the primary problem to begin with.

What would our account suggest as a more promising strategy? As we argued, the fall-back option and default basis for wider trust-networks are personal trust-relations. These need to be strengthened and developed in order to reintegrate conspiracy theorists back into the "knowledge society". In terms of general strategies, that means that debunking conspiracy theories at the level of a big, abstract, and anonymous institution will have less impact than questioning these theories that takes place at the level of personal relations. As an example: a debunking campaign against anti-vax conspiracy theories will have probably less impact if it primarily consists of pronouncements from, say, the World Health Organization. The debunking campaign will be a lot more successful if the trusted family doctor is the one who carefully explains the value of vaccination campaigns.

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THE (SOCIAL) EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES   355

Secondly, personal relations with people who believe conspiracy theories should be kept alive—not inviting Uncle Bernd over for Christmas anymore because he has developed funky views on the causes for the refugee crisis might have short-term benefits for the general atmosphere at the Christmas dinner, but it will have devastating long-term effects for the epistemic trust-network of Uncle Bernd.

In general, it would be important not to further alienate or ostracize conspiracy theory believers from those social networks that still provide a link to the knowledge generated by the reliable epistemic institutions of an open society. Already labelling someone as a "conspiracy theorist" is, of course, a first move towards ostracizing that person. Perhaps it would be better not to use this label in discussions with conspiracy theorists, and instead address conspiracy theories as what they ultimately often are: false theories that are based on misleading evidence.

We started our chapter with the observation that conspiracies sometimes happen and that, therefore, belief in a conspiracy theory can't be irrational just because you believe that certain events are orchestrated by a conspiracy. Indeed, uncovering actual conspiracies in our society is important. Conspiracy theorizing might occasionally be onto something, and in this case we need to know. So, shouldn't one conclude that conspiracy theorizing is an important force for the good in our society? Shouldn't we tolerate the growth of false conspiracy theories as a harmless (and sometimes even somewhat entertaining) side-effect of an important control mechanism?

We have argued that this would be naive. False conspiracy theories are dangerous for the institutions of open societies. They undermine and eventually destroy the trust network that is necessary for these institutions to perform their primary functions. As a consequence, their very existence may be put in question. It is thus necessary that we understand why (some) people are prone to believe false conspiracy theories, even though the evidential situations for these theories seems objectively bad. This will require epistemological, sociological, and psychological research on conspiracy theories and their believers. This is not a witch-hunt.

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