



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

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

Clearing Up Some Conceptual Confusions About Conspiracy Theory Theorising

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Dentith, Matthew R. X. and Martin Orr. "Clearing Up Some Conceptual Confusions About Conspiracy Theory Theorising." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6, no. 1 (2017): 9-16.

<http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3oY>

In volume 5, issue 10 of this journal, we—along with five other conspiracy theory theorists (Lee Basham, David Coady, Kurtis Hagen, Ginna Husting, and Marius Raab)—took the authors of an opinion piece in *Le Monde* to task for advocating a cure to conspiracy theorising (Basham and Dentith 2016). The authors of that piece—Gérald Bronner, Véronique Campion-Vincent, Sylvain Delouvé, Sebastian Dieguez, Nicolas Gauvrit, Anthony Lantian, and Pascal Wagner-Egger—with the exception of Karen Douglas—have since replied with a lengthy response, in which they claim:

What “they” had in mind, as must be clear by now, was to study how people, on their own or under some external influence, *think* and come to endorse some *beliefs* about such things. That, “they” think, would need some *data*, rather than wishful thinking, ideological clamours or armchair reasoning (Dieguez et al. 2016, 32).

So, we (at least two of us) are glad we could be of service, helping them elicit their purpose from the opinion piece they penned for *Le Monde*. However, we think that the lengthy response they have written raises more questions about their project than answers. In this short reply we will look at three systemic issues in their response: misrepresenting the work of the scholars they are responding to; the naive nature of their scientific research project; and the worry they are engaged in special pleading.

Misrepresentation *En Masse*

A curious feature of their response is to try and make out that the authors and co-signatories of the response to the *Le Monde* piece are inconsistent, or even hypocritical. We take issue with that for two reasons.

The first issue is the simplest to explain: yes, some of the earlier work of the co-signatories (some of it ten years old) is no longer reflective of their current thinking. You would think that people changing their minds, or refining their views would be considered an academic virtue, but it seems we are expected to hold fast to outdated views, or toe certain disciplinarian lines. As is to be expected, any group of scholars is bound to advance work that, despite broad-based agreements, will provide evidence of differences in approaches and conclusions.

The second issue is that where our respondents try to make out that our work is inconsistent, they achieve that only by misrepresenting said work. The number of these errors in their piece are too numerous for this short response, so let us just point out four examples, ranging from the bizarre (yet oddly mundane) to the worrying.

First, the mundane. They make much of the claim Lee Basham is the sole author of the co-signed letter, writing that “[Th]e article is referenced with Lee Basham as the sole author” (Dieguez et al. 2016, 20). Yet, as is clear from the article itself, Matthew R. X. Dentith is

listed as its co-author. This seems a simple mistake, but it is one that vexes them so much that they devote an entire footnote to what is an error in their collective reading of the piece. More troubling is how they present our work. For example, they misrepresent one of the co-author's work by claiming 'Dentith seems very worried by those he calls "conspiracists"' (Dieguez et al. 2016, 26). They seem to have missed section 7, 'Stipulating Conspiracism', where Dentith states quite clearly:

It might be also be the case that once we investigate Conspiracism, it turns out to be a fairly useless thesis, especially if it turns out there are not many (if any) conspiracists. However, if we are going to treat the thesis of Conspiracism seriously—and investigate it—we need to keep in mind that conspiracists are simply one kind of conspiracy theorist. The putative existence of such conspiracists does not tell us that belief in conspiracy theories *generally* is problematic. The question should be 'When, if ever, is a conspiracy theorist a conspiracist?' rather than presupposing that conspiracy theorists suffer from conspiracist ideation (Dentith, forthcoming).

'When, if ever' are hardly the words of someone who is vexed or troubled by the existence of conspiracists.

This is not the only example of such misrepresentation. Another of our works, a piece co-written by Ginna Husting and Martin Orr, gets similar treatment. Rather than attempting to 'delegitimize the claims of alien believers' (Dieguez et al. 2016, 26), Husting and Orr write:

While it is tempting to argue that Hofstadter is simply pointing to certain claims and claimants *who seem* truly misguided—for example, those who argue that aliens walk among us—*this conclusion neglects a fundamentally important process* (Husting and Orr 2007, 140 [emphasis added]).

Husting and Orr's meaning is clear, and the use of the example is to make a point about our inability to establish *a priori* the truth of a belief or claim (whether a theory or not) simply by fixing the label 'conspiracy theory' to it. Likewise, in pointing out that we characterize the belief that the death of Elvis Presley was faked as 'extreme' (Dieguez et al. 2016, 26) we are objecting to the use of this example, and only this example, to reject all 'conspiracy theories' as a class of knowledge-claim. When we argue that 'some claims characterized as conspiracy theories are false', (Husting and Orr 2007, 131) the qualifier 'characterized as' is rather important to our meaning. Perhaps we should have been more direct: the point is that not all claims characterized as conspiracy theories are false.

We can debate the willfulness or sloppiness of these misrepresentations, but what is even worse is that they misrepresent the central argument of the piece they are directly replying to. By dropping essential qualifiers from the co-signatories argument they commit us to views we never expressed.

They claim that our position:

[C]an thus be framed as the following two-fold hypothesis: *because real conspiracies have happened and still happen, conspiracy theories are not only warranted but necessary; the only reason this is not obvious to everyone is that “conspiracy theories” have been made to reflect badly on those who assert them by the very people they purport to unmask, and their enablers* (Dieguez et al. 2016, 21).

Yet that is not what we said. Indeed, we are not committed to any general claim that ‘conspiracy theories are not only warranted but necessary’; at best we are committed to the two claims that:

1. We should not dismiss theories as unwarranted merely because they are called ‘conspiracy theories’, and
2. We should not downplay the necessity of *conspiracy theorising*. There should be no prescription against theorising about conspiracies, especially in a democracy, even if it turns out that some of those conspiracy theories will be pernicious, even damaging.¹

So, at best, we agree that conspiracy theories are necessary, in that open democracies should tolerate (if not promote) investigating claims of conspiracy (the investigation of which will be predicated on the expression of conspiracy theories), but nowhere do we claim that conspiracy theories are *in all cases* warranted.

Now, it seems that what our colleagues meant to say is that we think conspiracy *theorising* is warranted, given that they claim:

Basham *et al.* (2016) essentially claim that conspiracy theorizing is generally warranted because there are conspiracies: that is a generalist view (Dieguez et al. 2016, 23).

Do we think conspiracy theorising is *generally* warranted? We certainly think it is warranted on a case-by-case basis, and we think that we should not dissuade people from theorising about conspiracies. Perhaps, then, we might extend an olive branch and say, yes, we think that—on some level—conspiracy theorising is generally warranted. There is, however, a huge difference between talk of conspiracy theorising and conspiracy theories. Thinking we should not dissuade people from theorising about conspiracies is a long way from saying that we think conspiracy theories are *in all cases* warranted and necessary. Perhaps our permissiveness about conspiracy theorising makes the existence of conspiracy theories in our politics necessary, but it does not commit us to any claim that said theories are necessarily warranted.

¹ As for the second clause; we do not know what that they are trying to say, and have to assume that as the authors are French, it is a bad translation of some otherwise pithy point.

Taken individually, these errors (and we have but mentioned one minor, and three major) are troubling. Taken together, these errors indicate that our interlocutors have, to paraphrase words of Sherlock Holmes, ‘seen, but not observed’ (Conan Doyle 1891). It is errors like these which make us think ‘they’ wrote their response in haste: quick to anger; faster to reply. Rather than searching the corpus of seven scholars for evidence of apparently inconsistent views, they might look at what we have written in context. A few isolated or partial quotes might make us look inconsistent, or even foolish, but we trust readers of the reply at hand to be more careful.

A Naive Empiricism

Misrepresenting our work is one thing, but a bigger worry is the thread that runs throughout their reply piece: they are scientists, and our armchair theorising is no match for their experimental method. However, we think our social scientist friends might want to reconsider their scientific model.

The tenor of their reply reminds us of Bill Murray’s line from ‘Ghostbusters’. ‘Back off man, I’m a scientist!’ (Murray, et al. 1984) Leaving to one side doctrinal disputes about the role of the social sciences in the grand schema of the sciences, the lack of engagement by these social scientists in pursuing the conceptual analysis of conspiracy theories by philosophers, sociologists, and the like is a marker of science done badly.

They, seemingly, do not want to dirty their work with the kind of theoretical concerns we are interested in. Rather, as scientists they see their job as going out to collect data, and then, perhaps, to theorise about said data later. But they are seemingly unaware of work from the middle of the century which showed that their naive empiricism is untenable. As W. V. Quine argued persuasively, evidence does not determine the truth of theories, because there are a potentially infinite number of theories consistent with a limited set of data points. Rather, our pre-existing theories (whether held explicitly or implicitly) end up being part of what determines what gets counted as evidence for said theories (Quine 1951). As social scientists, they are likely more familiar with the work of C. Wright Mills, who might suggest that ‘only within the curiously self-imposed limitations of their arbitrary epistemology have they stated their questions and answers.... [They] are possessed by ... methodological inhibition’ (Mills 1959, 55).

The issue here is that our social scientists are taking the spectre of conspiracism and conspiracists seriously, without either doing the conceptual work to first identify what counts as conspiracist ideation *before going off to find people who might suffer from it*, or acknowledging that much of this work has already been done. The work of other scholars is ignored, and the difficult preliminary work of clarifying concepts and their relationships avoided. (That this work can often be most comfortably performed in an armchair is beside the point.)

Their whole project depends on taking the ‘conspiracist mindset’ as established empirical fact. Maybe the whole enterprise is scientific *per se*, but, if so, it is poorly conceptualised and

operationalised. What we bring to this debate is a conceptual rigour that they, too, seem to want. Throughout their piece our colleagues ask for more time to work out definitions, or answer fundamental questions. Yet even a cursory look at the literature in philosophy, sociology, or anthropology shows that many of these questions are—if not outright answered—carefully considered (as we will show in the final section). But rather than engage with that work, they opt for special pleading: we need more time to work out the answers for ourselves!

A Case of Special Pleading

This brings us to our final set of worries; the fact that the reply piece penned by our colleagues ultimately rests upon special pleading.

Our social scientist friends present their project in the best possible light. They write: So, what were “they” up to? Quite simply, “they” advocated for more research. “They” figured that, before “fighting” against, or “curing”, conspiracy theories, it would be good to know exactly what one is talking about (Dieguez et al. 2016, 21).

Specifically, they ask:

Are conspiracy theories bad? Are they good? Are they always bad, are they always good? Who endorses them, who produces them, and why? Are there different types of conspiracy theories, conspiracy theorists, and conspiracy consumers (Dieguez et al. 2016, 21)?

These questions have been addressed by scholars such as ourselves. Indeed, for a fulsome accounting of the problems of defining what counts as a conspiracy theory, and how our chosen definitions often presuppose answers to the research questions we are asking, they could do worse than look at the first three chapters of Dentith’s book, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories* (Dentith 2014).

The idea we can research a topic without knowing the terms of the topic seems rather backwards. If we do not define what counts as a ‘conspiracy theory’, how do we begin to measure when someone believes in such a theory, let alone whether that belief is rational or irrational? It is clear ‘they’ think they know what a conspiracy theory is, because they research belief in them. So why the reluctance to settle on a definition? Is it because settling on a definition would lead to problems in making their work seemingly fit together as the product of a coherent research programme?

Indeed, for researchers in search of a definition, they seem to have an awful lot to say about the definition they claim to have not yet settled upon.

For example, they claim:

[A]sserting that a conspiracy theory is any kind of thinking or explanation that involves a conspiracy—real, possible or imaginary—and that’s all there is to it, seems like a premature attempt to settle the issue, as if the topic itself was a non-topic and anyone—and that’s a lot of people—who thinks there is something there of interest is simply misguided, or manipulated (Dieguez et al. 2016, 22).

That is to say, they are at least aware that scholars have presented definitions of what counts as a ‘conspiracy theory’, and they have found said definitions wanting. That—at the very least—means they are operating with some definition of the subject-at-hand.² (And we would be the last to suggest that conspiracy theories are not of interest.)

So, what is their definition?

For the time being, thus, a “conspiracy theory” is what the conspiracist mindset tends to produce and be attracted to, an apparently circular definition that rests on ongoing work but is firmly grounded in relevant research fields such as cognitive epidemiology, niche construction and cognitively driven cultural studies, and could be refined or refuted depending on future results (Dieguez et al. 2016, 30).

Where do we start? They define conspiracy theories as irrational to believe despite earlier in their piece admitting some conspiracy theories have turned out to be warranted. Either they think those warranted theories somehow only became rational to believe over time (at which point we can say they are ignorant of the history of certain prominent examples) or they are being inconsistent with their terminology. Both issues have long been addressed in the wider academic literature.

It follows, then, from their definition that a conspiracy theorist is simply a believer in some irrational theory about a conspiracy. It is telling that they defend their scientific endeavour by pointing only towards weird and wacky conspiracy theories. They ask why alien shape-shifting reptile theories persist, and, yes, that is a good question. Yet they do not talk about the alleged conspiracy theories which turned out to be warranted nonetheless, like the Moscow Show Trials, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, or Watergate. It’s as if these examples of people theorising about actual conspiracies (yet being accused at the time of being irrational conspiracy theorists) are not of interest to them. Could it be because their theoretical basis for their scientific endeavour is entirely predicated on the idea that conspiracy theorists are not only gullible or subject to confirmation bias, but pathologically so—to the point that scientifically-informed state intervention is desirable? They ask us to explain why unwarranted conspiracy theories persist. We could ask them to explain how they would have

² We leave to the side that, once again, our social scientist friends have failed to capture or present this work accurately. These definitions they claim make the topic a non-starter are, in fact, aimed at looking at the broad class of theories covered by such a general definition, such that we can get to the heart of the question of how we judge and appraise such theories.

reacted to John Dewey's claim the Moscow Trials were rigged back in the 1930s, or to the claim that U.S. intelligence agencies were sweeping up intercontinental communications (subsequently documented by Edward Snowden).

What makes this all the worse is they *acknowledge* they start with a circular definition; a conspiracy theory is the sort of thing that attracts a deficient type of person, one plagued by a conspiracy mindset (which is assumed to be a problem from the get-go, rather than, say, the more widespread problems of confirmation bias, or premature closure of inquiry). Yes, people who believe things that are not true is a problem, so why not start there? That they proceed from a circular definition of the core concept, and then expect empirical research to fix fundamental conceptual problems, is just bad research design.

The Crux of the Matter

We stand, then, by our earlier claim that these social scientists seem to be committed to shutting down talk of conspiracy theories (Basham and Dentith 2016). After all, why would they not? They believe them to be, in all cases, bad beliefs. This, then, is the heart of our disagreement. We (both the authors of this article, and the undersigned of the piece the social scientists replied to) have done the conceptual work the social scientists claim they want to uncover in their empirical work. Now, they could embrace that fact, and consider the work of their academic peers seriously, using it to look at the cases where beliefs in conspiracy go awry (and also at those wonderful examples where it turned out the conspiracy theory was not just true, but well-evidenced and warranted to believe from the outset).

That is to say, before you decide something needs fixing, you need to come up with something other than a circular definition that rests on the existence of something that is demonstrated only by the research conducted premised upon your circular definition. What you do not do is assume the beneficence of those concerned about 'the kids targeted by the programs' (Dieguez et al. 2016, 30). That governments might discourage children from thinking critically about their governments (and the corporations they often serve), despite the very real history of the criminal abuse of power, seems to concern them only because they had not been consulted.

Apparently, though, 'armchair philosophising' (or, better put, careful conceptualisation of research problems) might interfere. This tendency to ignore the work of philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and the like shows a stunning lack of insight into the role such theorists have had on the development of the scientific method over the Twentieth Century. Our conceptual work is the underpinnings of good, rigorous science. We clarify the theoretical definitions upon which quality research is grounded. However, scientists who work without definitions (or try to hand wave their need for them away) ultimately produce results which can be easily questioned. After all, if we do not define what a 'conspiracy theory' is, how can we possibly measure belief in one? And if we do not know what a conspiracy theory is, how can we identify who the conspiracy theorists are? Yet, while they have a (circular) definition, they are not willing to engage in the conceptual analysis of it. It would, it seems, just get in the way of their 'science'.

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