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Fred Matthews

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Conspiracy Theories, Scepticism, and Non-Liberal Politics

Fred Matthews 

Department of Philosophy, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT

There has been much interest in conspiracy theories (CTs) amongst philosophers in recent years. The aim of this paper will be to apply some of the philosophical research to issues in political theory. I will first provide an overview of some of the philosophical discussions about CTs. While acknowledging that *particularism* is currently the dominant position in the literature, I will contend that the ‘undue scepticism problem’, a modified version of an argument put forward by Brian Keeley, is an important general objection to many CTs. This in turn leads to some substantial conclusions for liberal political philosophy, as the undue scepticism problem sets up a strong argument against non-liberal alternatives to liberal thought. I shall argue that we are justified in having far more doubt about the reliability of official sources in non-liberal societies, and it is legitimate to be more sceptical about claims designed to bolster non-liberal politics. Moreover, because scepticism is often more warranted in non-liberal societies, this may provide the possibility for the state to be stable, even if it is highly tyrannical or ineffective. These considerations are not intended to be decisive, but raise unresolved questions about the viability of non-liberal politics.

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories have received a substantial amount of interest from epistemologists, but how should political philosophers approach the issue of CTs? There is not a great deal of research in this area, but the usual approach is to take a highly negative attitude towards conspiracy theories. The literature normally makes the assumption that ‘conspiracy theories’ are disreputable, and discussions centre around the degree to which it is permissible to use censorship or state intervention to counter conspiracy theorists (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009; Cibik and Hardoš 2022). There have also been ethical objections to conspiracy theories on various grounds (see, e.g. Stokes 2018). That is not the approach I will take here, however. Instead, I will contend that it may be helpful for political philosophers to investigate some of the arguments and positions adopted by social epistemologists – who, interestingly and atypically, are often careful not to dismiss all CTs as irrational nonsense.

The structure of the paper will be as follows. First, I will discuss the issue of how to define the term ‘conspiracy theory’. Next, I will outline some aspects of the philosophical debate about conspiracy theories, and I will argue that one particular philosophical argument against CTs (the ‘undue scepticism problem’) has an important role to play in combatting some conspiracy theories. In the final section of the paper, I will argue that the undue scepticism problem has significant implications for political theory. This is because the only sensible application of this position sets up basic philosophical problems for anyone wishing to defend non-liberal politics. This does not mean that

CONTACT Fred Matthews  fred.matthews@bristol.ac.uk  Department of Philosophy, University of Bristol, Cotham House, Bristol, BS6 6JL, UK

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the undue scepticism problem is the only (or most important) philosophical argument in favour of broadly liberal political theory, but it nonetheless helps to shed light on important philosophical issues: we are justified in being more sceptical about official sources in non-liberal societies, and more doubtful about arguments and data designed to support non-liberal politics. Moreover, a result of this is that people in non-liberal states are always, to some extent, deprived of genuine knowledge. Finally, because scepticism may be much more warranted in illiberal states, they may be able to achieve a greater level of stability than we might have thought possible, even if they are highly oppressive or ineffective.

The Definition of ‘Conspiracy Theory’

First of all, I would like to put forward a definition of CTs, although it is very difficult to do this accurately. Let us begin with a relatively ‘neutral’ definition: a conspiracy theory is any explanation of an event, series of events, or a practice, which cites a conspiracy as a salient cause. On this definition, any theory positing that there is a conspiracy can be described as a ‘conspiracy theory’. In the epistemological literature, this is the most common way to conceptualize conspiracy theories (Dentith 2019, 2). On the most basic reading, this definition includes many theories that are widely accepted as being true, and which are not controversial in the least. As philosophers such as Charles Pigden (2007) have noted, any historically literate person is a conspiracy theorist, at least on the most straightforward definition of the term ‘conspiracy theory’. However, this is not what many people mean when they talk about ‘conspiracy theories’. The term is often an abusive one, and is used to dismiss theories that the speaker believes lack good evidence. According to Napolitano and Reuter (2021), for instance, experimental philosophy supports the idea that the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is pejorative and used to indicate crippling epistemic defects.¹ It should be stressed that these are generalizations, and sometimes the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is not pejorative. More general talk of ‘conspiring’ and ‘conspiracies’ has been a common and often unobjectionable practice for centuries, for example in legal and economic contexts.² It is also worth noting that whether the disparaging use of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ actually reduces belief in ‘conspiracy theories’ is an open question (see, e.g. Wood 2016), although the pejorative usage is still very common (see also Hayward 2022, 148; Hagen 2010, 153).

For example, the view that 9/11 was an inside job, and that JFK was killed by the CIA, are commonly labelled ‘conspiracy theories’ in the *negative* sense of that term. Why are these theories so often considered to be unwarranted and irrational? The most straightforward answer is that these theories lack evidence, and they have been refuted on an empirical level. But we might wonder why people are so sure that this is the case. Have all those who dismiss CTs as unwarranted and irrational investigated the evidence themselves? Naturally, the majority of us have not, as this would be infeasible. We are instead placing our trust in others to tell us that such ideas are wrong. Some people are relying on official institutions, experts, and agencies to accurately determine – and to report truthfully – whether a particular conspiracy theory is warranted or unwarranted. Generally, the CTs that go *against* these official sources are the ones that are considered unwarranted, and earn the pejorative title of ‘conspiracy theories’.

So, we arrive at a somewhat narrower definition of ‘conspiracy theories’: CTs are theories which posit that some event or practice is the result of a conspiracy, and these theories are in tension with the dominant view in official institutions, at least in Western societies (cf. Pigden 2007, 17–18). Conspiracy theories – in the pejorative sense that people often use the term – will therefore have a *transgressive* element: they will run up against the received wisdom in Western states. They might also question experts and dispute the trustworthiness of the media, scientists, research organizations, and so on.

This account seems to capture the essence of the most prominent CTs, but I have no doubt that there are some theories we would wish to label as CTs that do not fit this definition. Defining the essence of CTs may be an impossible task; they are fluid, and they can exist in

various guises (Clarke 2002; Hagen 2018). There is no sense, then, in which talking about CTs will be easy, but if we want to examine the relationship between CTs and political philosophy, we need a starting point, and the definitions given above seem to capture as much about the nature of conspiracy theories as is practically possible here. To avoid all confusion, neither of the definitions I have given so far is necessarily intended to indicate the merits or deficiencies of the theories being considered. The first definition is a broad one, and captures more mainstream theories as well as transgressive ones, while the second definition comes closer to capturing what many people usually mean when they talk about ‘conspiracy theories’.

The Theoretical Debate and the Undue Scepticism Problem

In the social sciences and much of the media, CTs have a bad name, and they are considered to be virtually irrational by definition. It would be impossible to survey all the arguments that have been deployed against CTs, or all the irrational features that they are supposed to have. It is common to dismiss CTs as imposing order on a disordered world (Barkun 2003), as assuming that there are vast and implausible conspiracies (Hofstadter 1965; Swami et al. 2011), as being unfalsifiable (e.g. Popper 2006), and as purely being the product of ‘bad thinking’ (Cassam 2015). Many philosophers and social scientists are of the view that we need not seriously engage with the claims that conspiracy theorists make, and they believe that CTs could have few positive qualities (e.g. Cassam 2019).

As documented by social epistemologists, however, this view is not necessarily well founded. In the last couple of decades, there has – with some important exceptions – been a growing tendency for philosophers to embrace *particularism*: the view that each conspiracy theory should be judged on its own merits, instead of dismissed out of hand. Philosophers such as Charles Pigden, David Coady, M Dentith, Lee Basham, and Kurtis Hagen have, to some degree, defended conspiracy theories from the charge of irrationality, arguing that this accusation applies, at best, to a subset of CTs. In part, this stems from a careful investigation of the concept of ‘conspiracy theory’, and the general sense is that there is no definition of conspiracy theories which warrants us to have a *prima facie* attitude of scepticism towards them (Pigden 2007; Coady 2007). If we use a straightforward, ‘neutral’ definition of CTs, it turns out that we are all conspiracy theorists, since history is full of proven conspiracies. But some philosophers have gone further, and have argued that even the CTs that are commonly condemned as irrational – even *transgressive* conspiracy theories that question the official story in Western societies – are not obviously wrong or as absurd as is usually claimed (Basham and Dentith 2015, 3; Hagen 2011; Dentith 2019; cf. Pigden 2019, 164–165).

Nonetheless, this does not mean that all social epistemologists take a positive view of conspiracy theories, and there are some general arguments which aim to undercut at least the more far-fetched ones. Perhaps the most persuasive philosophical case against ‘unwarranted conspiracy theories’ (UCTs) was made by Brian Keeley, who argued that UCTs suffer from the generalized fault that they entail an ‘almost nihilistic degree of skepticism and absurdism’ by disputing the trustworthiness of official institutions on a grand scale (Keeley 1999, 125). Keeley does not claim that there is a clear line between warranted and unwarranted CTs, and he ends the article with a conclusion that is particularist in spirit: ‘... there is nothing straight-forwardly analytic that allows us to distinguish between good and bad conspiracy theories. We seem to be confronted with a spectrum of cases, ranging from the believable to the highly implausible’ (Keeley 1999, 126). Nonetheless, Keeley’s argument is intended to target a subset of CTs (see Keeley 2003, 105–106), and I think that there is something correct about his line of reasoning. I shall term my version of this argument the ‘undue scepticism problem’. I do not believe that it creates a completely solid general objection to CTs, as we shall see, but I think that it creates rules of theorizing that should be obeyed, and that some CTs fall foul of these constraints.

My rendering of the ‘undue scepticism problem’ says that some prominent conspiracy theories rely on excessive and extreme questioning of official sources of information and expert opinion. This excessive scepticism may, at times, involve undermining the trustworthiness of official channels of

information to the degree that it is unclear why we should trust these official sources more generally. This in turn may lead to a situation in which we are sliding towards a form of philosophical scepticism (i.e. scepticism which goes well beyond 'normal' questioning). This may undermine the possibility of reasoning about a variety of issues, such as current affairs, science, philosophy, and so on. As Keeley puts it, 'At some point, we shall be forced to recognize the unwarranted nature of the conspiracy theory if we are to be left with any warranted explanations and beliefs at all. . . . To the extent that a conspiracy theory relies on a global and far-reaching doubt of the motives and good will of others, it is akin to global philosophical skepticism. These extreme skeptical stances should be dealt with in the same way' (Keeley 1999, 123–126; see also Harris 2018, esp. 255–257, for a similar position; see also Dentith 2022, 4, for a discussion of some similar issues and arguments).

How 'excessive' or 'extreme' does the scepticism have to be to cross this line? For interesting and difficult cases, it is unlikely that there will be a straightforward heuristic for determining what counts as 'excessive' scepticism. Does that mean that the concept is a somewhat unhelpful one? I would argue not – because it is, as a general rule, not reasonable to expect people to map out precise boundaries in this way in all philosophical contexts (think of applied ethical issues, for example). In many cases, it will turn on whether the conspiracy theorist is able to specifically target her scepticism, and present good reasons why the authorities may be prejudiced or otherwise unable to impartially analyse the evidence. In some cases, it is possible for CTs to make the case for this, and in such situations we cannot claim that the scepticism is 'undue'. However, as a very general rule, we can say that the scepticism becomes excessive when the CT is not able to specifically target its scepticism. It is worth mentioning that 'specifically targeted scepticism' – in the sense that I am using the term here – can still be wide-ranging regarding (e.g.) the *number* of institutions or individuals targeted. For instance, one might question US government officials' accounts of the background to the 2003 Iraq War, and such scepticism could extend to many official sources in Western societies. However, such scepticism may still be 'specifically targeted' in the sense that I am talking about here, because it might be possible to extend the scepticism only to people who we have good reason to believe will be prejudiced or unable to analyse the evidence in a fair manner.

Why would we think that some prominent CTs lead to a high level of general scepticism? Some of them do so because the extent to which they question official sources may leave us with serious doubts about the general reliability of those sources. Clear cases of this occur when we encounter claims about 'superconspiracies'. However, it may be thought that focusing on these theories makes things a little too easy, despite their ostensible popularity. With that said, though, there are some seemingly more 'reasonable' CTs which may fall foul of the undue scepticism problem. Some of these theories appear to be more specifically targeted, but they in fact rely on extensive questioning of official channels of information, such as the media, scientists, witnesses, independent journalists, researchers, and academics. Let us therefore have a closer look at how apparently more restrained CTs slide towards this. I shall use two examples: Moon Landing conspiracy theories, which are purportedly about a specific event, and vaccine hesitancy, which is more general in nature but not a CT of the 'superconspiracy' variety. Moon Landing CTs do not appear to lead to a high level of scepticism on first glance; proponents gather specific evidence about the background to the Apollo programme, they critique the photographs presented by NASA as evidence, etc. Problems arise, however, when we consider the substantial amount of deception and/or incompetence that would be necessary on the part of scientists, independent observers, photography experts, journalists, third party governments, and so on. It is not just that the majority of official sources oppose this CT – some theories can be warranted or true even in the face of this – but rather that an extraordinarily high level of scepticism about the trustworthiness and competence of our usual sources of knowledge would have to be employed. If all these sources could be so misled about the Moon Landings, is there any reason to trust them on other matters? To be fair, we *might* still be able to trust them on many issues, but their credibility would be tarnished beyond recognition. Accepting Moon Landing conspiracy theories takes us on a path to a more wide-ranging scepticism.

Similar problems arise with vaccine hesitancy. While certain concerns about vaccine safety and efficacy may be plausible and debated by the scientific community (see Stratton and Ford 2012; Doshi 2017),³ there are some claims made about vaccines which are usually classified as ‘conspiracy theories’. This might seem a little colloquial and imprecise: the assertion that vaccines have side effects not acknowledged by the scientific mainstream is not itself a claim about a *conspiracy*. Vaccine scepticism inevitably takes us towards claims of conspiracy, however, because the great majority of scientists do not think that vaccines are unsafe – at least not to the extent that vaccine sceptics believe (see Stassijns et al. 2016; DeStefano and Shimabukuro 2019). Therefore, it is almost inevitable that some claims of conspiracy will become part of vaccine hesitancy, because so many scientists and researchers have investigated the safety of vaccines. Sometimes the majority does err, but if there is evidence available for vaccine sceptics’ claims, it is very difficult to see why there is quite a high level of agreement on this issue in the scientific community, barring some kind of conspiracy. This is particularly true considering the wide variety of scientists from all over the world, and from all sorts of backgrounds, who agree on this issue (cf. Basham 2016, 8; Dentith 2018, 204).

Does vaccine hesitancy take us towards more widespread scepticism, though? There may be some anti-vaccine CTs that do not, but generally the level of scepticism about official and scientific sources would have to be extensive. As with Moon Landing conspiracy theories, we must entertain a high level of distrust about sources that we rely on for important knowledge, particularly scientific authorities. Once again, if we think that they could be so badly mistaken about this issue, is there any reason not to take the scepticism further? The difference between vaccine hesitancy and genuinely more ‘restrained’ CTs, such as certain JFK assassination theories or 9/11 ‘inside job’ theories, is that these can be more specifically targeted. 9/11 inside job CTs do not necessarily involve questioning official scientific authorities to the same degree as vaccine hesitancy. Casting doubt on the official story about 9/11 may simply involve analysis of background information and circumstantial evidence, including the many proven US Government conspiracies. None of this is to say that JFK or 9/11 theories are correct (and I think there are many reasons to believe they are wrong), but the point is that they can be more specifically targeted so as to avoid taking us on a path to extensive scepticism.

It is important to clarify this argument. First, I am not arguing that conspiracy theories, as a general category, are epistemically *self-defeating* on account of their scepticism (cf. Rääkkä 2009, 195). Certainly, scepticism can make a theory self-defeating, but that is not the core problem here: the main issue is simply whether a theory casts enough doubt on vital sources of knowledge to irreparably damage the trustworthiness of those sources. Secondly, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that Keeley’s argument has been challenged in the philosophical literature, with critics alleging that relatively few CTs (except perhaps rather fanciful ones) will actually push towards extreme scepticism (see Rääkkä 2009, 195; Pigden 2019; cf. Basham 2003). However, I would contend that these concerns – or at least many of them – can be answered by emphasizing that the undue scepticism problem is merely one of many considerations, and only applies to a subset of CTs. The mistake here would be to frame the undue scepticism problem in sweeping terms without appreciating its limitations, or to assume that (almost) all CTs which run contrary to official sources in Western societies will fall foul of this argument (for a possible example of this view, see Harris 2018, 255–256; but cf. Keeley 2003, 105). This is not the position that I am defending here, and because I believe the undue scepticism problem has a more modest role to play, many potential criticisms do not (obviously) apply to my rendering of the undue scepticism problem (e.g. the criticisms found in Pigden 2019, 141–143/160, and some of those in Hagen 2022, 212–214).

Thirdly, whether or not scepticism is in fact a problem has to do with the kind of society that the theory is formulated in – or which sort of government the theory targets. An important clause in the undue scepticism problem says that it is best applied in liberal societies with a free press and independent (or relatively independent) institutions (Keeley 1999, 122). It is important to bear in mind that I am using the term ‘liberal’ broadly here: for the purposes of this article, a polity can be called liberal if it has the following features. It should have a meaningful separation of powers; there should be at least minimally free and fair elections; a partially free press is required; freedom of

speech, association and religion need to be present; and there should be some civil institutions that have genuine independence from the government (see Wolin 2016). While narrower understandings of 'liberalism' are possible (and indeed very common in political philosophy), it would be unrealistic to expect the considerations raised by the undue scepticism problem to support a *specific* or *more stringent* understanding of 'liberalism'. There is little in this argument that would allow us to adjudicate between John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, and Friedrich Hayek, for instance – or for that matter between contemporary liberal democracies such as the UK, France, or the US. However, it may be possible to use the undue scepticism problem to provide some support for a broadly liberal system against illiberal politics.

With this in mind, I will contend that, in non-liberal systems,⁴ the undue scepticism problem does not apply as strongly. In other words, scepticism about official sources is inherently more problematic in liberal societies than non-liberal ones, and we have a freer hand to question official sources of information in illiberal states. On this reading, extreme scepticism as such is therefore not always a problem, because scepticism can actually be considerably more *warranted* in non-liberal societies. Problems arise only when the level of scepticism implicit in a theory is undue, considering the nature of the society – i.e. where the society lies on the liberal/authoritarian spectrum. Of course, if scepticism is often (more) warranted in non-liberal societies, it will not be easy to build a *positive case* for the belief that there are state cover-ups; it may simply mean that agnosticism is more justifiable. The key point is not that building a positive case for accusations of conspiracy is easier in non-liberal societies, but rather that we are more warranted in being sceptical about official sources and generally more agnostic about claims of governmental conspiracies in non-liberal states.⁵

The Theoretical Issues and Non-Liberal Politics

What implications may this have for political philosophy? In the battle between competing political ideologies, the belief that it is possible to form more extensive conspiracy theories about some systems than others will lead to a situation in which some political systems are more easily defensible than others. Let us begin with the premise that the types of conspiracies usually proposed by conspiracy theorists are morally bad by their very nature. They are, most of the time, seen as bad by the standards of all political theories, including liberal, socialist, conservative, and Marxist perspectives. I am not arguing that *all* state conspiracies are seen as bad by *all* philosophical positions. This is quite clearly not the case – some thinkers, most famously Plato, have argued that ordinary people should be kept in the dark about the true workings of the state for their own benefit (*Republic*, esp. 540e, 417a-b). In contemporary political thought, some Marxists may believe that anti-capitalist conspiracies are commendable; some technocratic utilitarians might (like Plato) wish for ordinary people to be kept in the dark about the inner workings of the state; some neoconservatives might favour conspiracies to reshape the Middle East. However, very few political theories would accept that state conspiracies comprise a positive state of affairs *tout court*. They may be necessary as a temporary measure in times of existential crisis, but hardly anyone would argue that such situations are ones that we should generally strive for. Even Stalinists would probably argue that state conspiracies are a 'necessary evil' to be used for fighting against capitalist aggressors (see, e.g. Gellately 2008). Moreover, the kinds of state conspiracies endorsed by certain ideologies are construed as being orchestrated by state agents who are, on some level, acting with the benefit of the general population in mind (which is not to say that they cannot be *ruthless* – ruthlessness may be considered a political virtue of some sort). This idea of the *benevolent conspiracy* is very different from what I am talking about here. Being able to level the charge that non-liberal societies are often more likely than liberal states to contain *malevolent* state conspiracies is highly significant. If the undue scepticism problem (in the form in which I have stated it) is correct, then it is more acceptable to argue that non-liberal societies without a free press or independent organizations could contain large-scale government conspiracies. So, therefore, *these* large-scale state conspiracies, which are

unacceptable according to the values of almost all political theories, are more of a problem for non-liberal societies than liberal ones.

It should be noted that the considerations above are generalizations. Clearly, liberal states *can* be conspiratorial, and in some cases liberal democratic governments might engage in conspiratorial activities to a greater extent than some non-liberal states. Liberal democracy will sometimes engender a greater degree of organized deception on the part of corporations and governments than political systems based on more obvious forms of social control, for example direct regulation of the media and social expression.⁶ Nonetheless, I will maintain that the considerations above are legitimate as *generalizations*, and in any case the undue scepticism problem provides some reasons for being more distrustful of non-liberal governments *than we otherwise would be*.

All of the above conclusions may appear reasonably obvious, but importantly the argument can be taken further. It can also be used to throw some doubt on arguments designed to *support* non-liberal politics. Imagine a defender of illiberal states attempts to argue that they are better at deterring crime or nurturing a sense of community and happiness in the population. The critic could say there is a significant possibility that any data collected about these phenomena has been fabricated or adulterated by the government. The non-liberal defender could reply that there are social scientists, journalists, and so on who can validate these claims. But in an illiberal society, these people will not be truly independent of the state, so why should we trust them? Even if they are trustworthy, perhaps they are being misled by a government scheme to cover up the evidence. Maybe various researchers from liberal societies can also verify the non-liberal defender's assertions, but even this would run into problems. These people would also rely on doing (say) fieldwork inside the country in question, and would probably have to draw upon sources from official organizations. That would create the possibility of government interference and distortion of the facts. To put it simply, it is not plausible to put a high level of trust in official sources in illiberal states.

This argument could be extended to almost *any* claims about the virtues of non-liberal societies. Of course, this will not work equally well against every kind of non-liberal system, because not all such societies are repressive to the same extent. Some non-liberal states will have a partially free press, or will have some organizations that are independent of the state. However, raising the probability of state conspiracies is bound to have some force against most non-liberal states, since they are, by definition, states that restrict the independence of civil institutions. The point is *not* that all claims bolstering non-liberal states can be brushed aside as unknowable, but rather that we are often entitled to have much *more doubt* about arguments that are designed to support them. If the undue scepticism problem holds, therefore, the critic of non-liberal states seems able to cast doubt on arguments designed to reinforce them.

Moreover, it is not only that there can always be considerable doubt about arguments in favour of non-liberal politics; it is also the case that people living in non-liberal states are always, to some extent, deprived of genuine knowledge. They can never have a high level of confidence that their government is providing reliable information about the kind of society they are living in, given the intrinsic unreliability of official sources in non-liberal states. If we accept the normative premise that it is important to have access to truthful information about one's society, this consideration weighs against illiberal states. And, once more, it is difficult to see which political theories would not agree that it is important to have some access to reliable information about the kind of society one lives in. Being in a situation where the basic trustworthiness of information given by various institutions can always be questioned is not a state of affairs that would be endorsed by many political theories. Put simply, having access – and knowing that you have access – to reliable knowledge-producing mechanisms is a normative good (see also Grant 2012).

It is worth emphasizing a further, perhaps even more important, point.⁷ Because knowledge-producing mechanisms are more unreliable in non-liberal states, this leads to a situation in which we not only have to worry about the possibility of state conspiracies, but also a situation which is difficult to change because it is unclear what information is true. This makes non-liberal tyrannies and ineffective non-liberal states potentially more stable than they otherwise would be; it might also

be the case that non-liberal tyrannies can achieve a greater level of stability than their liberal counterparts. As critics of liberalism have observed, the idea that liberal states are rarely as tyrannical as non-liberal states is something of a myth. Some critics focus on the period of liberal modernity lasting from c.1700–1900. As they note, for many people living during this period – slaves, colonial subjects, women, impoverished citizens, etc. – liberal states could be just as violent and oppressive as feudal and authoritarian societies, and indeed the line between ‘liberalism’ and ‘authoritarianism’ was not always clear (Jones 2020, 67–68). But what is worse than a repressive regime? An oppressive regime that is stable and difficult to criticize and dislodge is surely worse. And in this respect, at least liberal states’ misdeeds (past and present), such as mass incarceration and imperial violence, can be more easily documented and corrected. In illiberal societies, much of the purportedly reliable information about governmental activities is always more open to question. In short: scepticism serves to muddy the waters. It deprives us of some of the tools necessary for social change. Therefore, without denying liberal societies’ wrongdoings, we can say that having a free press and independent organizations renders it possible to uncover these misdeeds and perhaps clear the way for change. Because of the considerations raised by the undue scepticism problem, we might say that non-liberal states, even if they are tyrannical and/or incompetent, will have a better chance than liberal states of achieving long-term stability. At the very least, these considerations show that illiberal states might be more stable than we would otherwise have been inclined to believe.

This stability is potentially a very important tool in the arsenal of authoritarian states. All political theories and societies yearn for stability, and John Rawls devoted some of his influential book *Political Liberalism* (1993) to the very question of how his ideal liberal state could achieve stability. Rawls argued that a liberal state can and should be ‘stable for the right reasons’: the existence and structure of the liberal state, as well as its primary laws and policies, ought to be justified to all reasonable citizens, and reasonable persons should feel confident that the state and fellow citizens will uphold their side of the social contract. If the issues that I have raised here are pertinent, it may imply that *illiberal* societies are able to achieve more practical stability than we might otherwise have thought, even if they are highly oppressive or ineffectual states. In other words, it may be easier than is commonly imagined for them to achieve ‘stability for the wrong reasons’. Utilitarian and Hobbesian justifications are still used to defend various kinds of authoritarianism – i.e. it is often thought that they are more ‘effective’ in various respects (see, e.g. Losurdo [2013] 2018). If I am correct, however, illiberal states may not only be draconian in their methods, but there is often no way in which to confidently assess whether these policies are conferring all the benefits that they claim. Their stability may not result from their effectiveness, but rather the fact that their opponents are denied the possibility of gathering and utilizing reliable social knowledge.

So, to sum up: it is more challenging than one might think to get a sense of all the misdeeds in non-liberal societies, since they will be difficult to document and assess (because scepticism can be warranted). Moreover, illiberal states may be able to claim that their authoritarian policies are having positive effects, and it may not be possible to show that this is dubious (again, because scepticism is warranted in illiberal states). This is what produces the potential stability: movements for social change implicitly rely on possessing a reasonably solid epistemological basis.

Conclusion

It is interesting and fruitful to analyse the epistemology of conspiracy theories, and to connect this to wider issues in political philosophy. I have maintained that one particular argument within the philosophical literature – the undue scepticism problem – is of interest to political theorists in ways that are not immediately evident. After outlining my version of this argument, I maintained that a sensible application of the undue scepticism problem sets up philosophical issues for anyone wishing to defend non-liberal politics. I have argued that we have, in general, a freer hand to accuse non-liberal states of large-scale conspiracies, and we are also justified in having more doubt about official sources in illiberal societies. It is therefore more acceptable to have a greater level of uncertainty about arguments designed to support

non-liberal politics. I have also suggested that people in illiberal states are often deprived of genuine knowledge. Finally, I have argued that these considerations mean that non-liberal states may be able to achieve greater stability than we might otherwise have thought – and perhaps more stability than their liberal counterparts – in cases where the state is highly ineffective or oppressive. These considerations are not supposed to be decisive, but to raise as yet unresolved questions about the tenability of non-liberal political theories.

Notes

1. See also Husting and Orr (2007), who argue that the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is used as a ‘strategy of exclusion’ to ‘demobilize certain voices and issues in public discourse’ (127).
2. One of the most famous historical discussions of conspiracy occurs in Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, in which the author writes that ‘People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the publick, or in some contrivance to raise prices’ (Smith [1776] 1976, I.x.c.27).
3. As a reviewer has pointed out, the history of vaccination has certainly not been without its controversies, perhaps most notably the Cutter Incident in the 1950s (see, e.g. Carapetis 2006). This is one reason why it would not be correct to think that all anti-vaccine CTs are vulnerable to the undue scepticism problem. The considerations here therefore apply only to a subset (although perhaps quite a large subset) of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories.
4. When I talk about ‘non-liberal’ or ‘illiberal’ politics, I am not talking about all non-liberal political views. For instance, anarchism is a non-liberal political theory, and in many anarchist societies the undue scepticism problem *would* apply (although that depends on precisely which conception of anarchism we are talking about). In this article, I am therefore largely talking about *statist* non-liberal political views.
5. It is worth emphasizing at this point that the difference between liberal and non-liberal states in this regard is a matter of degree: in all existing liberal societies, there are serious biasing factors in the government, the media, and other institutions (see also Basham 2003). For example, in the US and the UK the press is freer than in China and Saudi Arabia, but no press is entirely free (see Hudson 2013; Hind 2021). It would be unwise to assume that, on the basis of Keeley’s argument, we can brush aside serious worries about official institutions in Western societies. We should bear in mind, then, that there are many complexities here that will have to be put aside.
6. I thank a reviewer for pointing out this ‘simple and ironic reality’, and encouraging exploration of this important issue.
7. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this line of argument.

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Notes on Contributor

Fred Matthews is studying for a PhD in philosophy at the University of Bristol, specializing in political philosophy and ethics. He previously studied an MPhil in political theory at the University of Oxford and a BA in philosophy at the University of East Anglia. His research interests include liberal political theory, the history of liberalism, virtue ethics, environmental ethics, personal autonomy, and value pluralism. He also takes an interest in conspiracy theories, and in particular the political controversies that they generate.

ORCID

Fred Matthews  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7981-4482>

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