

On Political Conspiracy Theories*

JUHA RÄIKKÄ

Philosophy, University of Turku

IT is often pointed out that *political conspiracy theories* are of limited falsifiability. Government officials' public statements and testimonies in a court of law that contradict a conspiracy theory can be interpreted as signs that support the theory. Almost all potentially falsifying evidence can be construed to be supporting or neutral. Official reports that contradict conspiracy theories are exactly what conspiracy theorists expect governments to produce. Although some people tend to reject conspiracy theories because of this feature, limited falsifiability is not really a problem. As many authors have argued, it is not *ad hoc* reasoning to suppose that misleading evidence will be thrown your way when one believes that there is somebody out there actively feeding that evidence to investigators and seeking to steer the investigation away from the truth of the matter.¹

However, limited falsifiability may lead to problems, even if it is not a problem *per se*. At least, this is the claim that has recently been defended.² While most conspiracy theories may not warrant outright dismissal, they do “warrant a degree of skepticism.”³ Although conspiracies sometimes occur, “it is *usually* not rational to believe in them.”⁴ In what follows, I will briefly analyze the view that most political conspiracy theories should be rejected on the grounds that they embody “an almost nihilistic degree of skepticism about the behavior and motivations of other people and the social institutions they constitute.”⁵ This view has been widely criticized, but I will try to show that the objections presented so far are not wholly convincing. I will then formulate my own argument against that position, and argue that, in a sense, political conspiracy theories may not be much weaker explanations than standard non-conspirational

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¹Cf. Keeley 1999, p. 121; Basham 2006, p. 126. Most conspiracy theories are eventually falsifiable. Even the once popular Satanic conspiracy theory that Adolf Hitler is the Antichrist and when he is beaten, people will quickly move to the Kingdom of God has been falsified. Russians captured Berlin in April of 1945, but the Kingdom of God is nowhere in sight. Cf. Basham 2001, p. 275.

²Keeley 1999.

³David Coady's (2003, p. 200) description of Keeley's position.

⁴Charles Pigden's (2006, p. 142) description of Keeley's position.

⁵Keeley 1999, p. 126.

explanations of political events. I will also say a few words about political explanation in general in order to say something more about conspiracy theories. As my own comments will be based partly on textual evidence, I will provide rather lengthy quotations. But let us start with a rough classification of conspiracy theories. Here I will, following Brian L. Keeley, be interested in *political* conspiracy theories, and especially those that are not so-called *total* political conspiracy theories. It is helpful to know what kinds of theories they are.

I. POLITICAL CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The focus of the present argument is on political conspiracy theories. There are many well-known non-political conspiracy theories. Jim Morrison did not really die in 1971. His death was a fake. Elvis Presley did not really die in 1977. His death was a fake too. Paul McCartney died in the 1960's and a replica took his place in the Beatles. Although it may sometimes be difficult to distinguish between the two classes, I will here try to focus on political conspiracy theories alone.

Political conspiracy theories are typically public rather than non-public theories. Here is an example of a non-public conspiracy theory. Jack and Helen spent a couple of days in Nairobi, and they told others that it was purely serendipitous that they met there. According to John, however, their meeting was not a coincidence; instead, they had conspired to meet there. Non-public conspiracy theories are relatively common, much more common than public conspiracy theories.⁶

Political conspiracy theories can be divided in global, local and total theories. A conspiracy theory is global rather than local when it aims to explain global or international events or when the explanation it provides refers to international affairs. A conspiracy theory that explains John F. Kennedy's murder by referring to a plot by the CIA, which had important connections to the Mafia and Cuba, is a global conspiracy theory, although the main focus of it lies in local (i.e. national) matters. Both global and local conspiracy theories should be distinguished from *total conspiracy theories*, which are outside the scope of my argument.⁷ Total conspiracy theories are sometimes referred to as "global", "truly global" or "mega" conspiracy theories, but let us use the term "total" here. Total theories aim to explain the course of world history or the whole of global politics by referring to a conspiracy or a series of conspiracies. Total conspiracy theories may claim, for instance: that both past and present events must be understood as the outcome of efforts by an immensely powerful but

⁶One may distinguish between public/non-public conspiracies and public/non-public sources of information about conspiracies. Some marital infidelities, for example, may be non-public in the first sense and public in the second.

⁷Keeley (2003, p. 106) is very explicit that his concern is not total or "truly vast" conspiracy theories.

secret group such as the Illuminati or Templars; that decades ago aliens arrived with UFOs and now control all affairs with the benevolent assistance of the US government or Military; or that the Antichrist lives among us and Satanic forces rule the world. As opposed to total conspiracy theories, global and local conspiracy theories aim to explain only limited historical phenomena such as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in April of 1986, the death of Princess Diana in August of 1997, the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in 2001 or the rapid escalation of the AIDS virus. If a total conspiracy theorist tries to explain, say, the murder of Jimmy Hoffa, she will refer to an explanation that explains not only Hoffa's death but many other things as well. It is characteristic of total conspiracy theories that they suggest the existence of a *permanent* conspiracy or set of conspiracies. Total conspiracy theorists may also claim that conspiring groups are so secret that people do not even know they exist; thus, they are much more secret than the organizations that are generally thought to be the world's most secret organizations, such as the U.S. National Security Agency.

Conspiracy theories that aim to explain only limited historical phenomena are often warranted, i.e. they provide the (more or less) correct explanation of events. This is understandable. Political conspiracies have been common in history as we know from original documents and the reports of professional historians. Non-public conspiracies are a part of many people's daily life, and most of us know that unimaginable disloyalties, conspiratorial sexual infidelities and secret business betrayals happen every now and then.

However, when conspiracy theories turn into official wisdom, people cease to call them conspiracy theories. In 1941 a belief in the Holocaust was a belief in some sort of a conspiracy theory, as it denied the official claim that the Jews were merely being resettled. But now, Holocaust denial is a crime in some countries, for instance in the UK, and the belief in the Holocaust is certainly not called a conspiracy theory. The theory that revealed that President Nixon was indirectly involved in the Watergate burglary was also once a conspiracy theory, but now it is a part of the official explanation of the White House tragedy in 1972. People who claimed that President Reagan sold guns to Iran in order to fund right-wing Contra guerrillas in Nicaragua were conspiracy theorists in 1986, but people who make the same claim now are just repeating something that everybody knows. It follows that not all explanations that explain historical events by referring to conspiracies are called conspiracy theories. Official explanations can be theories and they can refer to conspiracies, but they cannot be conspiracy theories (unless they are official explanations of *wrong* authorities).⁸ The view that the well-known events on the 11th of September in 2001 were due to a

⁸Suppose Saddam Hussein claimed that the destruction of World Trade Center towers was planned by Bush's administration. This claim could have been both an official explanation (in Iraq) and a conspiracy theory (in the US). The view that official explanations cannot be conspiracy theories is commonly accepted, but some authors deny the view and call all the explanations that refer to conspiracies "conspiracy theories". See e.g. Pigden 2006.

conspiracy on the part of al-Qaeda is not a conspiracy theory. This way of using the concept of conspiracy theory is not accepted by all writers in the field, but there are good grounds to follow it, as it is in line with the ordinary meaning of “conspiracy theory.”

Daily news about secret negotiations or political plots between this and that party are not usually called conspiracy theories either. They do reveal “conspiracies”, but normally the conspirators are clever and confess their “conspiracy” quickly enough. In other cases there is nothing to confess, as such “conspiracies” are considered to be a part of the business. In local administrative practices, all kinds of semi-legal decisions (regarding public health services, elderly care, town planning etc.) are common, but the critics of them are not called conspiracy theorists.

It is often said that political conspiracy theories are paranoid. Most famously this claim is made by historian Richard Hofstadter in his classical essay on “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”, and in some metaphorical sense the claim may be true.⁹ Be that as it may, however, it is important to notice that not all political views that can be labelled as “paranoid” are conspiracy theories. Consider the following claims presented in public debates:

1. The politics of the United Nations will slowly incorporate America into a World State.
2. The World Trade Organization has different political aims than it is said to have.
3. The United States has less power than the other countries in the United Nations.
4. Nostradamus had foretold the attack against the Manhattan twin towers.
5. The working class lives in false consciousness.

All of these claims can be easily connected to political conspiracy theorizing—i.e. they can be used as partial explanations of political events—but as such they are not conspiracy theories. The first claim may express a (paranoid?) fear of the outcome of politics, while the second may express a (paranoid?) fear of the real motives behind politics. The third claim is simply a (paranoid?) description of the state of affairs. The fourth claim reports on a prophecy, and the fifth claim is a part of a social theory.

II. KEELEY’S ARGUMENT AGAINST CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The view that most political conspiracy theories should be rejected has been defended by Brian Keeley. He defines a subset of conspiracy theories which he

⁹Hofstadter 1966. He makes it clear that he is not using the expression “paranoid style” in a clinical sense, but borrows it for other purposes. See also Davis 1972; Vankin 1991; Melley 2000; Barkun 2003.

calls “unwarranted conspiracy theories” or UCTs. According to Keeley, UCTs have the following characteristics:

- (1) The explanations provided by UCTs run counter to some received, official or “obvious” account.
- (2) The true intentions behind the conspiracy are invariably nefarious.
- (3) UCTs typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events.
- (4) The truths behind events explained by UCTs are typically well-guarded secrets, even if the ultimate perpetrators are sometimes well-known public figures.
- (5) The chief tool of the theorist is “errant data”, i.e. data which is either unaccounted for by a theory, or which would, if true, contradict that theory.

Keeley adds that these criteria “do not distinguish UCTs from all conspiracies we are warranted in believing.” For instance, he confesses that both the “Watergate and Iran-Contra affair” meet all of the criteria, yet that belief in these conspiracies was warranted. In Keeley’s view, however, *most* conspiracy theories that meet UCT criteria are unwarranted. Conspiracy theories do not warrant outright dismissal, but we are entitled to suspect them.¹⁰

Keeley’s main argument against accepting UCTs as explanations is an argument that stresses the importance of *trust* in belief-formation. He writes that the “lesson of conspiracy theories is that we ought to recognize such theories as embodying an almost nihilistic degree of skepticism about the behavior and motivations of other people and the social institutions they constitute.”¹¹ Most conspiracy theories undermine the public trust that is necessary if we wish to have *any* warranted beliefs. As the public debate about the alleged conspiracy continues, conspiracy theorists are typically forced to expand the circle of alleged conspirators. Keeley argues:

[W]e are warranted in believing the claims of science because these claims are the result of a social mechanism of warranted belief production. In the public sphere where conspiracy theories dwell, there are related mechanisms for generating warranted beliefs. There is the free press, made up of reporters, editors, and owners who compete to publish “the scoop” before others do. There are governmental agencies charged with investigating incidents, producing data, and publishing findings. And there are, of course, various “free agents” (including the conspiracy theorists themselves) who are members of the public. Inherent in the claim that alleged evidence against a theory should be construed as evidence for that theory is a pervasive skepticism about our public, fact-gathering institutions and the individuals working in them. Thus, as a conspiracy theory matures, attempt after attempt to falsify a conspiracy theory appears to succeed, and this apparent success must be explained as the nefarious work of conspirators. As a result of this process,

¹⁰Keeley 1999, pp. 116–118. On the definition of “conspiracy theory”, see e.g. Clarke 2002, p. 134; Coady 2003, p. 199. It is not my task here to evaluate Keeley’s definition of (unwarranted) “conspiracy theory”.

¹¹Keeley 1999, p. 126.

an initial claim that a small group of people is conspiring gives way to claims of larger and larger conspiracies. . . . It is this pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions entailed by some mature conspiracy theories which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted. It is not their lack of falsifiability per se, but the increasing amount of skepticism required to maintain faith in a conspiracy theory as time passes and the conspiracy is not uncovered in a convincing fashion. As this skepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes. . . . In the process of holding onto a belief in an increasingly massive conspiracy behind more and more public events, we undermine the grounds of believing in anything. At some point, we shall be forced to recognize the unwarranted nature of conspiracy theory if we are to left with *any* warranted explanations and beliefs at all.¹²

In a later article, Keeley repeats his key point. We are not justified in rejecting UCTs on *a priori* grounds (i.e. simply on the grounds that they are UCTs), but we are justified in rejecting most of them on *a posteriori* grounds. “As time passes and a particular theory is not substantiated by independent evidence, it is either the case that we simply reject the theory, or the scope of the theory must be expanded to explain the lack of confirming evidence (e.g., that various members of the media must be ‘in’ on the conspiracy, hence their lack of investigative interest in the story).”¹³ Consequently, the degree of global skepticism required to continue to hold the theory becomes “genuinely nihilistic”, and “it can be rejected on the same grounds on which we reject such globally skeptical worries as that the world came into existence only five minutes ago.”¹⁴

Keeley’s argument brings to mind David Hume’s famous remarks in “Of Miracles.” Many of our beliefs are based on the testimony of others, and we seem to need a testimony-free basis for trusting those testimonies.¹⁵ As C. A. J. Coady argues in *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (1992), Hume’s solution to the problem is not altogether unproblematic.¹⁶ The idea that we could find a testimony-free (inductive) basis for *all* our beliefs that rely on testimony sounds too optimistic, to say the least. Perhaps it is worth mentioning here that Keeley does not even try to solve this problem in his discussion, but takes it for granted that somehow beliefs that are based merely on testimony can be justified.¹⁷

¹²Ibid., pp. 122–123.

¹³Keeley 2003, p. 105.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 105. Notice that there are different kinds of skepticism and different kinds of conspiracies. Take these three different skeptical views of what governments busy themselves with: (1) Government officials are sources of routine misinformation. (2) Government officials conspire to conceal information from the public. (3) Government officials conspire to conceal information from the public about government conspiracies. The first view is skeptical, but not necessarily a conspiracy theory (misinformation may be plausibly random); the second is a weak kind of conspiracy theory; the third is a strong kind of conspiracy theory.

¹⁵Hume 1957, p. 111, see also p. 115.

¹⁶Coady 1992, pp. 85–86.

¹⁷Alvin I. Goldman (1999, pp. 126–130) discusses non-inductionist (i.e. “nonreductionist”) theories of testimonial justification in his *Knowledge in a Social World*.

III. AGAINST THE PUBLIC TRUST APPROACH

Keeley's public trust approach to conspiracy theories has faced a lot of criticism. Charles Pigden has argued against him by suggesting that "the belief-forming strategy" Keeley recommends—"a strategy that systematically discounts conspiracy"—is irrational and "*prima facie* at fault."¹⁸ Pigden writes:

Western governments and government agencies have engaged in morally dodgy conspiracies. Hence theories which say that they do are not obviously faulty or foolish. . . . The idea that conspiracy theories as such are somehow intellectually suspect is a superstitious or irrational belief, since there is no reason whatsoever to think it true. It is an *idiotic* superstition since a modicum of critical reflection reveals that it is false.¹⁹

This is a good point, as it certainly *would* be irrational not to take into account the possibility of a conspiracy when explaining events. As an objection against Keeley, however, Pigden's remark is unsuccessful. It is clear that Keeley does *not* recommend a belief-forming strategy that "systematically discounts conspiracy." All that he argues is that in the process of evaluating different explanations UCTs tend to lose, since the skepticism they entail is too extensive. Perhaps we are justified in adopting a sort of a negative attitude toward UCTs (since they have typically been such bad explanations), but we are not justified in rejecting them on *a priori* grounds.

Another critic of Keeley distinguishes between the evaluation of conspiracy theories and the evaluation of conspiracy theorists. According to Steve Clarke, Keeley's argument is mistaken as he conflates the case against UCTs with a case against "the explanatory stratagems" favored by conspiracy theorists. He argues that Keeley:

observes that some contemporary conspiracy theorists have a tendency to react to criticism of their preferred theories by adapting these theories and increasing the number of conspirators involved in the alleged conspiracy. . . . This pattern may often be followed, but the fact that it is often followed is an observation about the fallacious reasoning patterns of some contemporary conspiracy theorists and this is simply not relevant to the epistemic evaluation of UCTs as a class. (. . .) UCTs are a set of theories that occupy a region of "logical space" that Keeley has roughly located through his characterization of them. Contemporary conspiracy theorists may have persistently advocated the less warrantable of these, but this tells us nothing about the warrant that more acceptable but unfancied conspiracy theories, which Keeley counts as UCTs, might actually deserve.²⁰

The distinction made here is important to keep in mind. It is one thing to evaluate a class of theories and another thing to evaluate how well theorists have developed and defended theories that belong to that class. However, I think

¹⁸Pigden 2006, p. 142.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 165.

²⁰Clarke 2002, pp. 141–142.

Keeley could easily agree with all this without rejecting his thesis that most conspiracy theories should be rejected because, at some point, they entail too much skepticism about people and institutions. He explicitly says that it is impossible to say anything about the warrantability of conspiracy theories *as a class*. In his words, “there is nothing straightforwardly analytic that allows us to distinguish between good and bad conspiracy theories.”²¹ Both unwarranted and warranted conspiracy theories may meet UCT criteria; most of the theories that meet the criteria are unwarranted, as they imply an “almost nihilistic degree of skepticism.”

Another critic argues that Keeley’s “public trust approach . . . begs the question against the conspiracy theorists.”²² In this view, Keeley is wrong in claiming that conspiracy theorists are somehow forced to adopt skepticism as the discussion continues, and thus find themselves in trouble. In fact, conspiracy theorists adopt skepticism about public institutions at the very beginning of their theorizing, not because they are forced to, but because there are good grounds for such skepticism. Conspiracies have been and are so common in human life that the conclusion that there is at least one very large conspiracy is “almost irresistible.”²³ Lee Basham writes:

The background suspicion of most conspiracy theorists is that public institutions are and perhaps always have been untrustworthy where certain critical interests of the dominant powers—corporations and government—are at stake. Keeley’s mistake is to imagine that conspiracy theorists begin in isolation from this broader skepticism and only adopt it in a heroic effort to save the theory as “positive confirming evidence” fails to come to light. But this is not the way of conspiratorial thinking. . . . The conspiracy theorist has compelling cause to suspect that today’s society suffers a serious and unavoidable *prior probability* of conspiracy. Conspiracy is all too human. . . . Government “security agencies” routinely erect convoluted networks of surveillance and frequently engage in ruthless manipulation and violence to achieve their ends, all in pursuit of remarkably vague goals variously labelled “intelligence”, “defense” and “national interest”. . . . While the total skepticism about public institutions is unreasonable, a total skepticism about the current existence of even one fairly involved, long term, widespread, and shocking conspiracy involving an elaborate cover-up/disinformation campaign is just as unreasonable. It sounds, well, *slightly crazy*. History would have us expect nothing else.²⁴

This is an interesting argument as it raises the question as to *when* the belief in a political conspiracy theory requires more skepticism than we can stomach. What is an unacceptable “degree of global skepticism”? We cannot say, but perhaps we should, if we are to apply Keeley’s criterion of theory-acceptance,

²¹Keeley 1999, p. 126.

²²Basham 2001, p. 274.

²³Basham 2003, p. 95. Obviously, conspiracy theorists may sympathize with anarchism as they often oppose authorities and governments. For a good introduction to the different versions of anarchism, see Sylvan 1995.

²⁴Basham 2001, pp. 270–272. Cf. Basham 2003, p. 95; Basham 2006, pp. 134–135.

namely the criterion that a theory should be rejected when it entails too much skepticism about institutions and testimony. Here, social epistemology as developed by Alvin Goldman in *Knowledge in a Social World* may help. Certain social structures and institutional arrangements are better than others from a *veritistic* point of view, and the better they are the less we are entitled to doubt them.²⁵

In general, however, I think Basham's argument too is problematic. The argument is based on an inductive reasoning that since we have a history of terrible conspiracies—be they political or non-political, public or non-public, local or global—, a conspiracy theorist is justified in continuing to hold her theory, even if it entails (either from the beginning or at least in the end) massive skepticism and claims such as “most members of media are involved in the conspiracy.”²⁶ In the discussion Keeley has doubted the validity of this induction, and I doubt it too.²⁷ History may prove that people have a tendency to conspire—there is a lot of psychological literature on why this is so²⁸—and hence that conspiracies are in that sense likely. In my view, however, history does *not* prove that “the current existence of even one fairly involved, long term, widespread, and shocking conspiracy” is likely. Given that people's belief in God or children's belief in Santa Claus are not caused by genuine conspiracies, the history of mankind is probably not familiar with any conspiracy that have involved hundreds of people and dozens of institutions.²⁹ Large-scale secret actions, such as extensive military operations, should not be confused with genuine conspiracies. The Holocaust was planned and conducted with the connivance of many people and many organizations, as was the Great Terror of 1934–1939 in the Soviet Union, but it is contestable whether these should be called genuine conspiracies, as it was generally “known” what was going on. What was not known was who was responsible, how extensive the action was, and so on. But relatively early, most or at least very many people did have a

²⁵Goldman (1999, p. 87) argues that institutions, social arrangements and practices have (instrumental) “veritistic value” insofar as they tend to promote truth and knowledge. Notice that conspiracy theorizing is more warranted in non-democratic societies than it is in democracies, and that some democratic societies are more vulnerable to conspiracies than others. The rationality of conspiracy theorizing depends on various factors, including the diversity of media ownership, the amount of public support to “alternative” journals and the independence of the branches of government from one another. If official explanations of events refer often enough to conspiracies, then special conspiracy theories are not needed. Cf. Coady 2006, p. 10.

²⁶The belief that the media conspire with political elites is discussed by Quinn 2001, pp. 112–132. “Media conspiracies” include claims such as (1) the press knew that Japan would attack to Pearl Harbour in December of 1941 and (2) the representatives of the BBC were involved in the “suicide” (read: the murder) of biological weapons expert David Kelly on the 18th of July, 2003. Kelly revealed that there were no “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq and caused serious problems to Britain's pro-war government. See McConnachie and Tudge 2005, p. 67 and p. 333.

²⁷Keeley 2003, p. 108. We should keep in mind Benjamin Franklin's famous words: “In order for three people to keep a secret, two must be dead”.

²⁸Pigden (1995, p. 28) has argued that many people are subject to a dangerous passion of being part of “the inner ring”.

²⁹Basham (2006, p. 135) thinks that “the most grand and sustained examples of mass conspiracy theory are traditional theistic religions”.

suspicion that the official stories were not completely correct. Perhaps we should distinguish between genuine conspiracies and conspiracies whose existence is widely known or presumed.³⁰ I think Keeley is right in claiming that it is not rational to believe in theories that entail far-reaching (genuine) conspiracies, although their existence is of course logically possible.

Yet another critic challenges Keeley's assumption that suspecting a very large group of people and institutions to be involved in a massive conspiracy implies *general skepticism* about those people and institutions. Suppose Jack does not believe in Helen's claim that she was in a business meeting on Tuesday evening. It does not follow that because of his doubts Jack has to doubt Helen's other claims as well. On the contrary, Jack may even think that Helen's other claims are probably true, because she tries to give him an impression that she is trustworthy (or because she simply does not have an incentive to lie in other matters). According to David Coady, this logic applies to conspiracy theories as well. He argues that

a clever conspiracy theorist can resist the slide toward skepticism by pointing out that those in positions of authority will want to have a reputation for honesty, otherwise their cover story will not be believed. The best way to acquire and maintain such a reputation is to be as honest as possible about all matters other than those involving conspiracy. So the logical consequence of conspiracy theorizing may well be an increased, rather than decreased, faith in people and institutions in authority.³¹

This is an interesting argument, although it is clear that normally people tend to trust people who they consider liars to a *lesser extent* rather than a greater extent. Logically speaking, Coady's point (that is also defended by Clarke) is important. Keeley is mistaken when he assumes that conspiracy theorists who have expanded their theories "to include more and more people and institutions" *have to suspect those people and institutions generally*. A person's general trust

³⁰Here is a recent example that, in my view, is not a genuine conspiracy as its existence was reported very early in major newspapers and people "knew" that there was a conspiracy. The so called "CIA torture flights" refer to the US practice of transporting detainees to secret detention centers where they are at a very high risk of being tortured and murdered. The kidnapped and arrested persons are kept outside of any judicial oversight, they do not have any rights that belong to prisoners of war, for instance, and they have not necessarily committed any crime. Until recently, most European countries officially claimed that they have not contributed to these operations. Secret detention centers and extraordinary rendition violate, among other things, the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Convention Against Torture, treaties that all the EU member states are bound to follow. However, according to the criticism that began already in 2003, many European governments knew and accepted that their airports were used for these purposes. The critics also argued that secret camps are placed in some European countries, as there were many governments that were willing to do almost anything Americans told them to do. The critics were more or less right. The report accepted in the European Parliament by a large majority on the 14th of February in 2007 concluded that many European countries "tolerated" illegal and immoral actions of the CIA, including secret flights over their territories. The countries named in the report were: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The report also uncovered the use of secret detention facilities used in Europe, for instance in Poland and Romania.

³¹Coady 2003, p. 203.

in media, government agencies and the court of law is perfectly consistent with the view that they have lied about a particular issue. It follows that the risk that we will not have “*any* warranted explanations and beliefs at all”, if we accept an expanded conspiracy theory, may be relatively small.

The question is: should we reject Keeley’s argument because of the failure Coady emphasizes? I think we should not. In my view, we are justified in rejecting a conspiracy theory if the only way to save it is to make “claims of larger and larger conspiracies”—*even* if this would *not* imply total skepticism. An implication that hundreds of people and dozens of institutions are involved in (genuine) conspiracy is strange enough to warrant rejection. Therefore, I conclude that Coady’s objection is not more decisive than those of Pigden, Clarke and Basham.

IV. A FURTHER ARGUMENT AGAINST THE PUBLIC TRUST APPROACH

Keeley is defending the thesis that *most* conspiracy theories are unwarranted. Therefore he is committed either to the view (1) that *most* conspiracy theorists end up making claims of larger and larger conspiracies, or to the view (2) that we are justified in rejecting *most* conspiracy theories for some other reason. The first view is empirically false. Typical conspiracy theories do not begin with skeptical assumptions, nor do they end up with them. Keeley seems to recognize this, as he writes that “*some* mature conspiracy theories” entail “pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions” (my emphasis). Anyone who thinks that the most favored “explanatory stratagem” of conspiracy theorists is to expand and expand their theories should read at least one book—there are many of them³²—that describes various conspiracy theories. Expanding one’s theory has been only one strategy among many, and it has not been very popular. The relatively common view that a runaway expansion “is characteristic to many conspiracy theories”³³ is simply false. *Conspiracy Encyclopedia* introduces 365 conspiracy theories; most of them are political, but only a few have claimed that the group of conspirators is “large” in the sense that Keeley uses this word.³⁴

³²Among others, a Danish writer Lars Bugge has published many books on the subject. See e.g. *Konspirationsteorier* (2003), *Flere Konspirationsteorier* (2004), *Endnu flere Konspirationsteorier* (2006). See also James McConnachie and Robin Tudge 2005.

³³Coady 2003, p. 201. Suppose a conspiracy theorist reads a document that is supposed to show that her theory is false. She need not claim that people who wrote the document are involved in the conspiracy. She can quite well argue that, actually, the conclusions of the document do not show that her theory is false—and she may be right in arguing so. The claim that Keeley’s view that “most conspiracy theorists end up making claims of larger and larger conspiracies” is empirically false, has been anticipated by Pigden (2006, p. 143).

³⁴*Conspiracy Encyclopedia: The Encyclopedia of Conspiracy Theories* 2005. When a conspiracy theory claims, for instance, that the “CIA was involved”, the theory does not specify how many persons are supposed to be involved. But it is plausible to interpret claims such as the “CIA was involved” to mean that *some* representatives of the CIA were involved.

It is easy to give examples of conspiracy theories that do not begin with skeptical assumptions nor end up with them. An interesting theory is related to the “transatlantic terrorist plot.” This conspiracy theory was defended for instance by Lieutenant-Colonel (ret.) Nigel Wylde, a former senior British Army Intelligence Officer. According to the official view, British police arrested 24 persons in and around London on the night of August 9, 2006 because they had planned to use liquid explosives on transatlantic flights. The sudden disclosure of the operation caused chaos and delayed flights for days. According to the conspiracy theory, the “transatlantic terrorist plot” was an invention of the UK security services, or at least the action that took place was a huge (intentional) overreaction. Prime Minister Tony Blair was in trouble because of the war in Iraq, and he desperately needed further proofs of the existence of dangerous terrorists that surrounded the British. The “arrest of terrorists” was wonderful news to Blair: indeed, a bit too wonderful to be true.³⁵ Those who defended this theory did not claim that the British police was part of the group that conspired. The police only received “information” from the British intelligence agency, i.e. from the couple of people who were responsible for the plan and put the “evidence” in the right places. As far as I know, the defenders have not changed their minds since then. Instead, they still believe that only a few people were involved, and that Tony Blair knew what was going on. An interesting detail here is that the “terrorists” had not yet purchased airline tickets, and that some of them did not even have passports on the day of the arrests. If they had a plan to attack in the next few days, why did they not have passports? If the whole plot was only a fake (as opposed to a massive overreaction) invented by British intelligence agency, why did they not hide passports and tickets in the terrorists’ apartments in order to give an impression that it was not a fake?

The second possible view to ascribe to Keeley is normatively empty. To say that we are justified in rejecting most conspiracy theories even if theorists do *not* make “claims of larger and larger conspiracies” is a statement, not an argument. Keeley may be right when he writes that quite often “we simply reject the theory.” But the question why “we” would be justified in doing so is left unanswered; the “pervasive skepticism” that “ultimately” provides us with the grounds to identify unwarranted theories does not apply when conspiracy theorists do not have to expand the group of conspirators in order to save the theory. Therefore, I agree with the other critics quoted that Keeley’s public trust approach is problematic, although my reasons for this conclusion differ from theirs.

Now, it is very likely that most political conspiracy theories *are* unwarranted. Too often they suffer from epistemic failures. They may appeal to unlikely motives and include explanatory gaps; they may be inconsistent with the observed facts they acknowledge and provide failed predictions. Often a

³⁵Wylde argued that the plot was invented in order to justify wide-ranging new security measures that threaten civil liberties and people’s right to privacy.

conspiracy theory can be rejected simply by pointing out that the alleged conspirators do not have any connections to each other, are too stupid to have designed such a vicious plan or lack the technological and material resources to carry it through. Some conspiracy theories suffer from internal inconsistency; others attribute omnipotence to the alleged conspirators.³⁶ A wonderful list of amazingly unintelligent conspiracy theories can be found for instance in *A Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories*.³⁷ Of course, in individual cases, judgments should be made carefully. It may sound unlikely that the president of a democratic country has a motive to authorize the bombing of a ship owned by an environmental organization. But this is exactly what happened when the *Rainbow Warrior I*, a ship operated by Greenpeace, was sunk by the French foreign intelligence agency in Auckland harbor in July of 1985; the operation, as we now know, was authorized by President Mitterrand.

I assume that what Keeley really wants to argue for is not so much the claim that “most conspiracy theories are unwarranted”, but rather the claim that “political conspiracy theories tend to provide worse explanations of political events than other theories.” The latter view is *very* popular, as conspiracy theories have a very bad reputation. To describe someone as a conspiracy theorist is often to imply that her views need not be taken seriously. No matter how convincingly conspiracy theorists try to defend their case, they are not accorded the same hearing that a proponent of a nonconspiratorial explanation would be accorded. This is especially so in intellectual circles. At the so-called grass root level of society, political conspiracy theories have been more popular, possibly because they provide an easy way to understand social phenomena, which would otherwise have been explained as acts of lonely lunatics or a series of accidents, intended by nobody. Who would like to live in such a chaotic and unorganized world? How could significant events have totally insignificant causes?

An interesting question is whether it is true that political conspiracy theories tend to provide worse explanations of political events than other theories. One reason why we may have a strong intuition that this has to be so is that “conspiracy theory” immediately brings to mind total conspiracy theories such as “the world economy is under the control of a secret organization of Jewish bankers” or non-political conspiracy theories such as “Elvis is still alive.” But if we put these kinds of theories aside and concentrate only on local and global political conspiracy theories, are we sure that they are generally speaking worse than the other theories presented in the context of political argumentation? I am not convinced, at least when the *correctness* of the theories is concerned. All kinds of theories appeal to unlikely motives and include explanatory gaps. Not only political conspiracy theories, but other theories as well are often inconsistent with observed facts and provide failed predictions. When it comes to historical

³⁶Cf. Basham 2001, p. 275; Pigden 1995, p. 9.

³⁷McConnachie and Tudge 2005.

explanations, all kinds of prejudices seem to be the rule rather than the exception.³⁸ Very often (i.e. almost always) political events are explained in various rival ways that differ considerably from each other; it follows that most explanations *have to be* wrong.³⁹ Therefore, if political conspiracy theories are generally speaking worse theories than the other theories that aim to explain political events, the difference between the two classes in this respect is not very remarkable—although some false theories may of course be better than other false theories, and it may be rational to believe in a theory even if it turns out to be false in the final analysis.⁴⁰ When we say that most political conspiracy theories are probably incorrect, we should add that the same applies to all other historical theories. This conclusion is of course consistent with the view that most political events should not be explained by referring to conspiracies.⁴¹ Many non-conspirational historical theories are likely to be false in one respect or another, but it does not follow that it is therefore unreasonable to believe in them or to prefer them to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories suffer from presuming a strong link between motives and outcomes, i.e. the ability of conspirators both to aim at the concealment of their action and to succeed in it. In this respect, conspiracy theories are insufficiently critical of the link between motives and outcomes. Some forms of historical explanation also suffer from this failing (i.e. any theory that puts too much weight on the ability of groups of individuals to predict and control outcomes), but many of the more satisfactory forms of historical explanation are more critical than that.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have argued that the view that most political conspiracy theories should be rejected on the grounds that they embody “an almost nihilistic degree of skepticism about the behavior and motivations of other people and the social institutions they constitute” is not acceptable. Political conspiracy theories may not be much weaker explanations than standard explanations of political events. To grant that most political conspiracy theories are probably false is not to grant that they are much worse than other theories that aim to explain political events, at least when the correctness of the theories is considered.

³⁸Historical explanations may be more biased in some societies than in others. I happen to live in a country that suffered a civil war in the early 20th century, and I must say that in our country, reading a couple of pages of a history book about the war suffices to reveal with whose side the author sympathizes. The same applies to books about the Second World War, and so on.

³⁹The fact that political events are typically explained in various rival ways implies that most explanations have to be wrong only if we assume the existence of a single historical truth. Someone might say, in the spirit of postmodernism, that two or more historical explanations that contradict each other can be equally true.

⁴⁰I do not even try to list the characteristics of “good” theories and explanations.

⁴¹Karl R. Popper (1972, p. 124) criticized the “conspiracy theory of society” in his *Conjectures and Refutations*. In his view, conspiracy theorists believe that “we can explain practically everything in society by asking who wanted it”.

Why have political conspiracies been so common in history? Does their existence tell about the “ruthlessness” of public life, to use Thomas Nagel’s famous expression?⁴² Perhaps, but the ruthlessness may be of a special kind. The fact is that it is relatively easy for many people to slip into a conspiracy without really noticing. Even modern democracies are full of “openly secretive” governmental and corporate institutions and committees, and many decision-procedures are secret, even if the decisions and their grounds may be public (though often they are not).⁴³ These institutions are able to control and hide disturbing information without too much effort. I am not claiming that the illegalities are common, nor that the people involved in the illegalities would not be responsible for them. The point here is only that conspirators do not typically use exotic oaths, secret codes or mystical passwords when they conspire, and that conspiracies do not usually require months of planning.⁴⁴ A typical conspirator that interests conspiracy theorists is a government official or business negotiator, a member of the administrative, political or business elite, who sits in a completely legal meeting and says “well” at the wrong moment—or does not say anything (although she should). When conspiracy theorists attribute a conspiracy to a certain group of people, they need not assume that it required careful preparation to devise a meticulous and ingenious plan. It would be wrong to say that typical conspirators are just ordinary people; but typical conspirators are not terribly extraordinary either. Most often, they are just people whose judgment failed profoundly and who were *able* to conspire.⁴⁵

It is generally known that our attitudes toward political conspiracy theories may have important psychological and social consequences. The view that we live in an ordered universe in which political conspiracies are ordinary things may give us hope that the world is not as absurd and chaotic as it sometimes seems. On the other hand, a belief in a conspiracy may lead to fear or sorrow. As Hofstadter put it in his 1964 essay, we “are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid [i.e. a conspiracy theorist] is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.”⁴⁶ Hofstadter’s point can be extended. One need not *believe* in a malevolent political conspiracy to experience unpleasant psychological states; it is enough to think that a conspiracy or conspiracies are frequently a possibility. Arguably, a person who strives for happiness in her personal life should not ponder on vicious conspiracies too much, and clever people do not start their day by bothering their minds with all kinds of possible conspiracies and wondering what is “really” behind political events. Be that as it may, however, it is important that in every

⁴²Nagel 1979, pp. 75–91.

⁴³Bok (1982) has convincingly described how institutions that have a justification for secrecy may end up with a wrong kind of secrecy.

⁴⁴For a similar point, see e.g. Pigden 1995, p. 28.

⁴⁵I assume here that at least in democratic societies political conspiracies are *prima facie* wrong, not that there cannot be circumstances in which a conspiracy is morally acceptable.

⁴⁶Hofstadter 1966, p. 40.

country there are *some people* who are interested in investigative journalism and political conspiracy theorizing.⁴⁷ Conspiracy theorists have done a lot of good in the past; undoubtedly they will do a lot of good in the future too.⁴⁸

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⁴⁷An interesting question is whether it is always possible to run together investigative journalism and conspiracy theories. Watergate was a peculiar kind of conspiracy theory because the people who exposed the Watergate conspiracy were not particularly conspiracy theorists, and needed to be told how far the conspiracy went.

⁴⁸It is fair to point out that conspiracy theories may have adverse consequences too. As has often been pointed out, conspiracy theorizing, *as a public activity*, may lead to harmful scapegoating and its implications may be racist and fascist rather than democratic. Conspiracy theories may undermine trust in political institutions. Certain conspiracy theories are kept artificially alive, because of their political effects; “conspiracy theorists” do not always believe in their theories, but repeat them in public because of political reasons. Conspiracy theories have close connections to populism, and when theories are accepted widely enough, they remain harmful *rumors*. Insane but harmful conspiracy theories have often concerned actions of the Jews (“the plague was caused by the Jews”). The right-wing conspiracy theories about vicious communist plots have also led to harmful consequences and human rights violations. Sometimes conspiracy theories are designed and disclosed to make political decision-making more difficult, and to create an impression that certain questions are still “open”. According to one theory, the view that human action causes severe changes in the global climate is based on a massive conspiracy, and there are many who benefit from this widely accepted (but wrong) view about the causes of global warming. Certain conspiracy theories are disguised *libels*: they place individual persons in a “false light” before the public eye.

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