



## Understanding Conspiracy Theories

By Farah Rasmi

In a world where the concept of truth is increasingly elusive, the propagation of information so easy, and distrust is on the rise, we find that ‘nothing is true’ and ‘everything is possible’. Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, we seem to be reaping what many politicians and fringe groups have sown, that is, a world where a clear truth is nowhere to be found. Conspiracy theories have taken over the internet, people seem to disagree on the very existence of the virus, let alone its origins. If anything, self-isolation appears to have increased the speed at which conspiracies spread as everyone shares and retweets any and all information regardless of the source or its credibility. However, the term ‘conspiracy theories’ has been overused in a haphazard manner that does nothing but eliminate the possibility of finding the truth. In order to understand any theory and deem it a conspiracy, one has to first grasp what the term means and why humans are so prone to believing and leaning towards them.

A common definition of conspiracy theories is that they are “a conviction that a group of actors meets in secret agreement with the purpose of attaining some malevolent goal.”<sup>[1]</sup> The idea of a conspiracy in itself is not unreasonable. In fact, history is filled with conspiracies and secret plans enacted by powerful figures in order to attain a certain goal that is usually malicious. Nonetheless, this in itself does not explain the overwhelming tendency to form patterns and

hypotheses which develop into conspiracy theories. According to Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Mark van Vugt, psychologists at The Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement, the inclination to believe in conspiracy theories has evolutionary roots.

In their study, they compare the different origins of this phenomenon within the evolutionary condition of human beings, explaining that it could be either an “evolutionary by-product” or that it could be an “adaptive” function “(a) to alert ancestral humans to the possibility that others were forming dangerous coalitions against them and (b) to simulate appropriate actions to fend off such threat.”<sup>[2]</sup> In the course of their research, the authors explain that while the cognitive skill and adaptation were helpful and almost essential to human survival when needing protection from possible harmful coalitions at the time. In this day and age this adaptive psychological condition might be doing more harm than good by “eliciting poor health choices e.g., refusing vaccines, climate-change skepticism, intergroup conflict, aggression and radicalizations.”<sup>[3]</sup>

The aforementioned research highlights that believing in conspiracy theories and forming patterns in order to protect oneself from a potential threat is a human tendency derived from survival and evolution rather than lunacy or irrationality. According to Dr. Péter Krekó, in *The Psychology of Conspiracy*, “conspiracy theories provide a group with “an outlet to hostility [...] and help interpret the past in a way that fits the group’s interest.” They also “explain unusual, atypical, and important events” and, among other things, “justify and support the strivings for in-group power and status.”<sup>[4]</sup> Krekó thus explains that conspiracy theories can provide a group with motivation or justification for their action within a socio-political environment, thereby moving them towards potential oppressions or aggressions that “cement social hierarchies.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Belief in conspiracy theories therefore evolved from being a mere survival mechanism of threat-anticipation, to (while always retaining that purpose) having an array of functionalities that,

even though normal, are often harmful within the current political context. A conspiracy theory ultimately helps to justify and explain the actions of a group or an individual. In order to build a conspiracy, knowledge of its contextual past helps in forming a theory about a group or an individual and characterises it based on a specific interpretation of a pattern. This often causes misinterpretation of actions and the formation of hypothetical links in order to fit the theory into a preconceived notion or stigma about a group. Jovan Byford argues that this habit of forming continuous links and conspiracy theories “is sufficiently robust to make it possible to speak of conspiracism not just as an explanatory style, but also as a *tradition of explanation*.”<sup>[6]</sup>

Speaking of conspiracy theories as a *tradition of explanation* helps us understand why certain theories last for as long as they do and why they are not limited by geographical locations or to specific ideologies. Tradition, according to Byford, is a “corpus of ideas, arguments, ‘facts’, ‘revelations’ and ‘proofs’ pertaining to the alleged world plot” that get passed down through generations of conspiracy theorists.<sup>[7]</sup> For instance, certain theories such as the idea of a secret global government that, depending on who you ask, can be ruled by the Jews, Zionists, Illuminati, or the Freemasons, get passed on through the generations and are widely believed or at the very least repeated across the planet.<sup>[8]</sup> In fact, studies show that some cultures can be more prone to believing certain conspiracy theories based on location and history. For example, in a study by Aleksandra Cichocka et al., the authors prove that upholding conspiracy beliefs is linked to the ‘in-group’s’ own identity and how it is being threatened: “Conviction that others are constantly conspiring to undermine one’s own in-group provides an image protecting explanation of the in-group’s misfortunes or disadvantaged position.”<sup>[9]</sup>

The idea of victimhood however is not limited to an in-group’s image, explanation of misfortunes, or a pattern of continuous attacks by outside forces. Victimhood can also be rooted

in a deep distrust of the political elite, political institutions, or opposing social groups. Conspiracy theories may not always be true, and can be far-fetched, but if the opposing entity has been proven distrustful once, it will afterwards be continuously susceptible to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theorists are also surrounded by a cloud of stigma that perceives conspiracy thinking as a pejorative thought process reserved for the unreasonable and delusional. Upon any accusation of being a conspiracy theorist, one's words could immediately become insignificant and objects of ridicule. Its use thus becomes a curse "approximately the same as screaming four-letter words" that virtually result in character assassinations. <sup>[10]</sup>

While Karl Popper describes conspiracy theories as "typical social phenomena" he also explains that "they become [particularly] important, for example, whenever people who believe in [them] come into power." <sup>[11]</sup> This is of vital significance to this paper, seeing as in the current political climate conspiracy theorising is no longer a fringe or minor concern. The phenomenon moved from actual minority groups who are usually more susceptible to it to those who fear they might someday become the minority group or feel they already are in the process of having their power threatened, regardless of the facts. In other words, since belief in conspiracy theories "is associated with general disenchantment with political authority, a sense of powerlessness, political cynicism, and more generally, 'the feeling of alienation and disaffection from the system' the *feeling* and not the fact, become the essential issue.

Now, this danger to which Popper alluded has become a reality, as the political elite in many countries consists of political theorists, who continuously accuse opponents of plotting against their people for their own malicious benefits. Their political narrative is, however, often devoid of theory and consists only of mere accusations with the purpose of de-legitimation. This phenomenon has been coined by Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum as the "new

conspiracism” in their book *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. They argue in their work that “the new conspiracism betrays a new destructive impulse: to de-legitimize democracy.”<sup>[12]</sup> They explain that while classic conspiracism consisted of a form of fact-finding or at least pattern forming that helped hypothesize an explanation for complicated events, the new form of conspiracism “dispenses with the burden of explanation.”<sup>[13]</sup>

Consequently, in a world where information is accessible at the press of a button, the propagation of conspiracist thought becomes instantly possible on an unimaginable scale. Thus, accusing an out-group of plotting a conspiracy becomes true and believable not based on facts and proof, but rather “the number of tweets [a] post would enjoy: the more retweets, the more credible the charge.”<sup>[14]</sup> In this case, conspiracism’s sole purpose becomes not to explain but rather to delegitimise—it automatically becomes a character assassination.

Therefore, the contemporary conspiracist dialogue has become a weapon of delegitimization, manipulation, and scapegoating in a new manner that kills facts and destroys truth. In the era of a mainstream media (including publishing houses, filmmaking industries, radio, etc.) that monetises and commercialises conspiracist thought by making it interesting, and propelling ideas of doubt and paranoia through movies, books, and documentaries, possible patterns and hidden plots become exciting and normalised.<sup>[15]</sup> According to Byford the “inevitable outcome of this approach, which shuns any firm conclusion or narrative closure in favour of doubt and ambiguity, is that the status of ‘counter-knowledge’ and conspiratorial pseudohistory is enhanced, at the expense of genuine scholarship” and truth becomes an illusion.<sup>[16]</sup>

When we start questioning everything, including our own thoughts, when ‘nothing is true’ and ‘everything is possible’, boundaries of societal order where norms of behaviour should exist, disappear. It is almost terrifying to come to the realization that trust and truth are almost non-

existent. Upon understanding the origins of conspiracist thought and why humans lean towards it, it becomes vital to be hyper-aware of what exactly we are hearing and repeating, and subsequently refuse to conform where conformity entails ignorance. We must hold on to a truth, in order avoid completely falling into the abyss of non-truth.

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- <sup>[1]</sup> Jan-Willem van Prooijen, and Mark van Vugt. ‘Conspiracy Theories: Evolved Functions and Psychological Mechanisms’. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13, no. 6 (1 November 2018): 770.
- <sup>[2]</sup> Van Prooijen and Mark van Vugt. ‘Conspiracy Theories,’ 771.
- <sup>[3]</sup> Van Prooijen and Mark van Vugt. ‘Conspiracy Theories,’ 784.
- <sup>[4]</sup> Péter Krekó. “Conspiracy theory as collective motivated cognition.” in *The Psychology of Conspiracy: A Festschrift for Mirosław Kofta*, eds. Michal Bilewicz, Aleksandra Cichocka, and Wiktor Soral. (Hove, East Sussex ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 63-64.
- <sup>[5]</sup> Krekó, “Conspiracy theory as collective motivated cognition,” 64.
- <sup>[6]</sup> Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 5.
- <sup>[7]</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 5.
- <sup>[8]</sup> Christian Doumergue, *Au Coeur Des Théories Du Complot* (Paris: Les éditions de l’Opportun, 2017), 22.
- <sup>[9]</sup> Aleksandra Cichocka, Agnieszka Golec de Zavala, Marta Marchlewska , and Mateusz Olechowski. “Grandiose delusions: Collective narcissism, secure in-group identification, and belief in conspiracies.” in *The Psychology of Conspiracy: A Festschrift for Mirosław Kofta*, eds. Michal Bilewicz, Aleksandra Cichocka, and Wiktor Soral. (Hove, East Sussex ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 44.
- <sup>[10]</sup> Noam Chomsky. ‘On Historical Amnesia, Foreign Policy, and Iraq, Noam Chomsky Interviewed by Kirk W. Johnson’, 2004. Accessed August 16, 2019, <https://chomsky.info/20040217/>.
- <sup>[11]</sup> Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. (Golden jubilee ed. London: Routledge, 1995), 325.
- <sup>[12]</sup> Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum. *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. (Princeton University Press, 2019), 2.
- <sup>[13]</sup> Muirhead and Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 3.
- <sup>[14]</sup> Muirhead and Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 3.
- <sup>[15]</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 8-17.
- <sup>[16]</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 9.