

## IN SEARCH OF A CONSPIRACY

### On Conspiracy Theories

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‘the all-out war on meaning’

Naomi Klein, 2023

I can’t find my glasses. I try to think where I last saw them. I look on my desk, on the bookcase next to my desk and in my rucksack. Nothing. My partner *must* have hidden them.

This is hardly a full-blown conspiracy theory. But it’s an example of how our brains work. At a moment of crisis, I might prefer to suspect my partner of a malicious act rather than confront my own absent-mindedness. Blaming my partner won’t help find my glasses, but the accusation shifts a weight off me and my inadequacies. At that precise moment, it’s a comforting idea, because I have no wish to question my own sanity. Finding a culprit to blame seems to make more sense. It’s also a neater, more tell-able story than the more trying one I have to work through if I really want to find my glasses. (After watching TV last night, didn’t I take my glasses off?)

This search for tell-able stories seems to lie deep within our psyches: we are pattern-detecting animals, always on the alert for threats, keen to explain them and we mobilize these instincts in the oddest of circumstances. Cancer patients will ask what they did wrong rather than accept they have simply been unlucky.<sup>1</sup>

Conspiracy theories—or stories like conspiracy theories—are as old as humanity. Think of those ancient Greek myths about malevolent, capricious gods, dabbling in individual fates. It’s unlikely that ancient Greeks believed in those gods in the same way that today’s followers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam believe in their gods. At a certain level, ancient Greeks knew that the stories about the gods were just stories, but these narratives were also, in some odd way, *comforting* stories. Somehow, it was easier or better to believe that fifty people died in a shipwreck because Poseidon had cursed them, rather than because there had been an unexpected storm or—even worse—because the ship’s captain was incompetent. Poseidon’s cruelty makes a better story.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard A. Friedman, ‘Why Conspiracy Theories Are So Alluring,’ *New York Review of Books*, 12 Feb 2021, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2021/02/12/why-conspiracy-theories-are-so-alluring/>

Such conspiracy-stories have popped up again and again. What were the macabre witch-hunts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, if not the result of conspiracy theories about a plot to destroy society? (There's been a protracted historical debate about whether any witches actually existed—it all turns on what you mean by 'witch'.) It was claimed that the French Revolution was planned by the Free Masons and the Russian Revolution by the Jews. In 1951, Senator McCarthy believed that Stalin was about to invade the USA, aided by a network of underground Communists. Opinion polls in the USA and UK regularly suggest that today about a tenth or even a fifth of the population believe such conspiracy theories. This don't really teach us anything new—the willingness to believe a dramatic narrative which provides a clear (if false) explanation of worrying events has always been with us.

As a general rule, each time a society has faced some major threat, there have been hucksters, fanatics and outright lunatics who have offered easy, tell-able stories to explain away the threat. In the last few years, we've gone through the Covid crisis and the effects of global warming can now be felt by every person on the planet. Add to this, the increasing social polarisation of most western societies, and two exceptionally vicious military conflicts (Ukraine and Gaza), and the attraction of a simple pan-explanatory story for everything bad becomes easier to understand. Often, the initial promise of such theories is that of calm and reassurance: you don't need to follow anti-Covid regulations, because there is no threat. You don't need to worry about the climate crisis, because it's an illusion. Pictures of atrocities in Ukraine and in Palestine are fake: no military, political or humanitarian action is required.

The visible political presence of conspiracy theories became more obvious during the Trump Presidency of 2016–20. This provoked a steady stream of useful articles, essays and books on the topic. Some concern the spikey problem of how to talk to a follower of conspiracy theories, some are confessional accounts by newly awoken escapees from conspiracy cultures, many survey and evaluate the effects of conspiracy culture. All these studies agree on important points: a substantial minority have chosen to accept social media as their principal means of understanding the world around them. Some of these people are then drawn to accept conspiracy theories. Because of the passion, the repetitiveness and the noise of these circuits, they can give the impression of representing some subterranean majority—in reality, they constitute embittered minorities. Whatever the initial urges that draw people into conspiracy cultures, their adherents become incredibly stubborn in their refusal to question or reconsider their beliefs.

Conspiracy cultures provide ever-changing, ever-expanding total explanations which are notoriously difficult to unpick. Debate with conspiracy theorists is usually difficult but—just possibly—empathy with them may unlock some doors.<sup>2</sup> The chaotic, spasmodic info-binges paraded by social media have made us more aware of these speculations: they form a constant, echoing parallel to the mainstream media.

Today, everyone can be a participant in an information marketplace. We're able to identify conspiracy theories as errant and foolish because we have other sources of information. This means that any reasonably intelligent person has the opportunity to compare and cross-check claims about an event, and to pick and choose between plausible explanations. Under these circumstances, why would anyone decide to choose a conspiracy theory?

I have a hunch that initial slide down the conspiratorial rabbit-hole starts with a type of knowing scepticism. The viewer, the eternal social media junky, slips onto conspiracy-theory sites *because* they're obviously ridiculous. They're a form of entertainment, and at first the viewer can pride him- or herself on their ability to laugh at them. James Ball slipped onto 4chan in this manner. It was '...a place that felt silly, nerdy and fun—and also often outrageously rude in a way you simply couldn't be otherwise.' The claims and protests constantly balanced on the border of 'joking-not-joking'.<sup>3</sup> Stories circulated and anyone who protested at any of them just added to the fun: what a joke, someone takes it seriously! Conspiracy theories are welcome moments of excitement when so much of modern life is boring or repellent.<sup>4</sup>

Social media sites are often dominated by influencers. Many are apolitical or openly commercial in their aims. They are skilled story-tellers, practiced at reducing an issue to a single dramatic story. Their tactics are simple and effective: they adopt an anti-elitist tone and a jokey, casual appearance. No one likes experts anymore. The influencer appears as a friend or neighbour, not an analyst.

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<sup>2</sup> See the useful notes by Marianna Spring, 'How should you talk to friends and relatives who believe in conspiracy theories?', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-55350794>, BBC News, 20 Dec 2020.

<sup>3</sup> James Ball, *The Other Pandemic: How QAnon Contaminated the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 21, 61.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism: the Downfall of Liberal Civilization* (London: Verso, 2024), p. 60.

But, the permanent struggle for primacy, power and numbers then draws even the most apolitical to consider and transmit sensationalistic claims.<sup>5</sup>

Such sites construct a sense of community and identification. Fears can be shared. ‘Where we go one, we go all,’ promised QAnon: a firm promise that you are not alone. In Melanie Klein’s otherwise excellent and thoughtful *Doppelganger*, these communal elements are downplayed.<sup>6</sup> Klein insists too much on the individualism of the typical conspiracy-theorist, who searches for simple go-it-alone cures for complex social problems. She writes: ‘Society is crashing, and you as an individual... need to prepare and toughen up.’<sup>7</sup> This is a neat summary of the political philosophy of the typical conspiracy-theorist, but it ignores the lived, felt reality of participation in such a cult, which promise community, fun and reassurance.

QAnon in particular also seemed to imply a type of self-empowerment. ‘Do the research!’ it enjoined, and by all accounts its hardcore nerdy followers spent countless days examining complex and demanding databases. I’d question the idea that these searches truly constitute ‘research’. A key element of real research is that you constantly challenge yourself, you are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of your methods and you review the basis of your beliefs. Because of the unformed, unself-aware nature of the typical conspiracy-theorist’s ‘research,’ as the quantity of data expands, the quality of the research degrades. Everything is simplified, reduced to basic urges. Philosopher Descartes once recommended doubt as a key analytic tool: question everything, he urged.<sup>8</sup> But the ‘research’ of the conspiracy theorist is based more on distrust than doubt. In a world where ‘nothing makes sense,’ the conspiracy theorist attempts to manufacture their own truth, almost as a form of self-medication.<sup>9</sup> An economic link between two people is proof that one has bought the other. A meeting proves the existence of a line of command. Rather than research an economic system, capitalism, conspiracy theorists rage against a cabal of specific individuals. Rather than consider the intricacies of complex government policies affecting millions of diverse people in different ways, good and bad, conspiracy theorists always simplify: all government action is bad.

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<sup>5</sup> The new world of social media is meticulously analysed in: Renée DiResta, *Invisible Rulers: the People Who Turn Lies into Reality* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip Into the Mirror World* (London: Allen Klein, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Klein, *Doppelganger*, p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> David J. Chalmers, *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy* (np: Penguin, 2023), pp. 45–47.

<sup>9</sup> Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism*, p. 116.

Putting these elements together, one sees the apparent attraction of conspiracy theories: they offer reassurance, comradeship, comfort, fun, excitement, even empowerment, and then they offer targets. Klein is clearly correct when she writes ‘conspiracy theorists get the facts wrong but often get the *feelings* right’.<sup>10</sup>

What is to be done?

There’s the comforting thought that conspiracy theories are so crazy, so incoherent, that eventually they must fall under their own weight. This may be comforting, but it’s probably not true. ‘Conspiracist discourse is an endless tease, always promising a new layer of revelation, or a new angle,’ notes James Meek.<sup>11</sup> As one point in the argument implodes, it’s replaced with another trail. Conspiracy theories morph and evolve, following fashions, picking new targets. They don’t form rational discourse that can be argued through. Instead, the belief systems of groups like QAnon are more like religions than ideologies, but they are not impregnable. Even those inside them can eventually realise that what they’re being asked to believe is simply impossible.<sup>12</sup> There have been plenty of cases of conspiracists who nakedly search to monetize their fantasies: behaviour which can disillusion and awaken even the most hardcore followers.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the conspiracy theorist’s scepticism may eventually be applied to themselves and their favourite sites. Research suggests the people are growing more sceptical of social media as a trustworthy source of information.<sup>14</sup>

There is at least one other option. Conspiracy cultures grow in the gap between governments and peoples, they’re provoked by arrogant, ill-planned, poorly-explained directives, they feed on uncertainty and suspicion. There is an opportunity for a humanitarian, humanist left to fill this gap and to provide not just information but comfort.

Sharif Gemie, 27 March 2024, revised 1 December 2014

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<sup>10</sup> Klein, *Doppelganger*, p. 242.

<sup>11</sup> James Meek, ‘Red Pill, Blue Pill,’ *London Review of Books* 42:20 (22 Oct 2020).

<sup>12</sup> See the thoughtful interview by Amelia Gentleman, ‘Escape from the rabbit hole: the conspiracy theorist who abandoned his dangerous beliefs,’ *Guardian* 4 Oct 2023.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/oct/04/escape-from-the-rabbit-hole-the-conspiracy-theorist-who-abandoned-his-dangerous-beliefs>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2024/mar/26/alex-jones-sandy-hook-shooting-documentary>

<sup>14</sup> *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023* (available online).

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