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Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorists[1]

"While you here do snoring lie,
Open-eyed conspiracy
His time doth take."
(William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act II, Scene 1)

I noted in the last chapter that the concepts of rumor and conspiracy theory are often linked, with the former being portrayed as a vehicle for the latter (e.g., Sunstein, 2009, p. 7; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 203). They are also linked inasmuch as they are both widely regarded as bad things. I defended rumors and rumor-mongers against their detractors in the last chapter. In this chapter I will defend conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists against theirs.

Several authors have claimed that there are more conspiracy theories and more conspiracy theorists now than in the past, that "conspiracism" or "conspiracy thinking" is on the rise (Keeley, 2006, pp. 45–6; Wilson, 1998, pp. 1–2). Typically these authors say or imply that this situation is undesirable, and some have been moved to offer solutions to this so-called problem (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 203). This chapter will argue that this is all a mistake. If anything, there are *fewer* conspiracy

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theories and theorists now than in the past (*less* conspiracism and conspiracy thinking), and it is *this* situation that should be deplored. Furthermore this deplorable situation has at least partly been brought about by the contemporary fashion for castigating certain people as "conspiracy theorists" and dismissing their beliefs as "conspiracy theories," a fashion which appears to have been started by fellow-philosopher Sir Karl Popper. These expressions were not widely used before Popper. Popper used them pejoratively, and they have retained those pejorative connotations to this day.[2]

The contemporary treatment of those accused of being conspiracy theorists is an intellectual witch hunt. Although those identified as "conspiracy theorists" are not literally subjected to an *auto da fé*, they are routinely sneered at, condescended to, or ignored. Of course some of them may deserve to be criticized or ignored (maybe even condescended to or sneered at), but there is no more justification for criticizing, ignoring, condescending to, or sneering at, people *because* they are conspiracy theorists than there was for punishing people *because* they were witches. One can denounce a witch hunt without defending everyone who has been accused of being a witch.

To many, this analogy will seem far-fetched. It will be objected that while there are no real witches, there are real conspiracy theorists. In fact, neither part of this claim is straightforwardly true. It all depends on how you define "witch" and on how you define "conspiracy theorist." If a witch is understood to be a person with magical powers derived from a relationship with Satan, then it would be objectionable to be a witch, but no one ever was one. If, on the other hand, a witch is understood to be a follower of a pre-Christian matriarchal religion, then there really were witches (and still are), but it is (and always was) an unobjectionable thing to be. The expression "conspiracy theorist" works in a similar way. On some definitions, there is something wrong with being a conspiracy theorist, but no one (or hardly anyone) is a conspiracy theorist. On other definitions, there really are conspiracy theorists (perhaps a lot of them) but there is nothing wrong with being one.

A definition of the first kind is suggested by Popper's approach to the issue. Suppose we define "a conspiracy theorist" as someone who believes what Popper called "*the* Conspiracy Theory of Society" (Popper, 1962, p. 94; 1972, p. 123). This is the theory that *everything* that happens (or at least everything big and bad that happens) is due to a *successful* conspiracy, that is, that the big bad thing that happens is due

to a secret plan to bring about exactly that big bad thing.[3] There is no need for us to consider Popper's arguments that the conspiracy theory of society is false. He is obviously right about this. What is not so clear is whether anyone has ever thought otherwise. Although Popper claims that the conspiracy theory of society is "very widespread" (Popper, 1972, p. 123), he offers no argument or evidence for this claim. Pigden seems to be right when he says that, so far from being very widespread, the conspiracy theory of society is "a thesis that no one believes" (Pigden, 2006b, p. 20). Even if there are people who believe it, the vast majority of those castigated as conspiracy theorists do not. For example, those who think that the Bush administration conspired to deceive the American public into believing that Saddam Hussein was involved with 9/11 typically do not believe that every big bad thing that happens is due to a conspiracy, let alone a conspiracy to bring about that very thing. For many of them suppose that the war in Iraq (the result, in part, of Bush's conspiracy) has led to a net decline in American power and prestige, which may or may not be a bad thing, but which is definitely not a bad thing that Bush conspired to bring about. The consequence was almost certainly the reverse of what he intended.

A definition of the second kind can be found in Pigden (2006a, p. 157). According to Pigden, a conspiracy theory is just a theory – true or false, rational or irrational, well-confirmed or otherwise – which explains some event or events by positing a conspiracy (not necessarily a successful one), and a conspiracy theorist is simply someone who subscribes to a conspiracy theory, understood in this way. Now there is clearly nothing wrong with being a conspiracy theorist in this sense. Indeed there would be something wrong with not being one. In order to avoid being a conspiracy theorist, in this sense, one would have to be almost completely misinformed or ignorant of both history and current affairs (not to mention a great deal of one's immediate environment). On Pigden's definition, so far from being nonexistent, conspiracy theorists are a dime a dozen. Indeed, most, if not all, of the self-proclaimed foes of conspiracy theory are conspiracy theorists in this sense. After all, many events are, and are widely known to be, due to conspiracies – coups, "disappearances," kidnappings, assassinations, terrorist attacks (in many cases), acts of torture, and a great deal of fraud, bribery, and corruption. These things do not happen (or at least do not happen very often) without secret plans and covert actions on the part of some group. Thus anyone who believes that there are such things as coups, "disappearances," kidnappings, assassinations, secret torture chambers,

or fraud, bribery, and corruption is pretty much bound to be a conspiracy theorist, in this sense.

So far we have considered two conceptions of what it is to be a conspiracy theorist. On one of them, the property of being a conspiracy theorist is an unobjectionable one, which applies to (almost) everyone. On the other, it is an objectionable property, which applies to (almost) no one. In what follows I will consider attempts to find a middle way, that is, a conception of what it is to be a conspiracy theorist, which makes it an objectionable thing to be, and which applies to some people and not to others. In particular, I will look for a conception of what it is to be a conspiracy theorist which makes it objectionable to be a conspiracy theorist and which applies to the people who are pilloried as such, but *not* to those who pillory them. As we shall see, such conceptions are hard to come by.

I have said that almost everyone is a conspiracy theorist, in Pigden's sense. But there do seem to be some exceptions. There are, that is, people who appear to think that conspiracies never happen, that no one ever conspires to do anything, and hence that conspiracy theorists are mistaken in the same way flat earth theorists are mistaken. Conspiracy theorists, on this view, are people who believe in something which just does not exist. I think we can safely ignore this view. Even Popper is at pains to stress that conspiracies do occur (1962, p. 95; 1972, p. 342), and most of his followers will concede the point, at least when pushed. On the face of it, that should be the end of the matter. Since conspiracies happen, it can't be irrational to believe they happen. Hence, it can't be irrational to be a conspiracy theorist. Yet many people accept the premise but balk at the conclusion. They agree that people conspire but insist nonetheless that conspiracy theorists are irrational, or in some other way misguided. When challenged to explain what they mean by the expression "conspiracy theorist" and what exactly is supposed to be the matter with being one, they typically respond with "Of course there are conspiracies, but ... ." Much of the rest of this chapter will be devoted to different ways of filling in the but-end of this sentence.

Conspiracies Don't Happen Often

Perhaps conspiracy theorists are people who fail to recognize how rarely conspiracies occur. Popper provides some support for this way of understanding who conspiracy theorists are and where they go

wrong, when he claims that conspiracies are "not very frequent" (Popper, 1972, p. 342). But Popper is just wrong about this. Conspiracy is a common form of behavior throughout history and in all cultures, a point that has been established very effectively in a series of articles by Charles Pigden (2006a, 2006b, 2007). Prior to Popper no one appears to have thought otherwise. Indeed, Popper himself does not appear strongly committed to the view that conspiracies are rare, admitting elsewhere that conspiracies are "typical social phenomena" (1962, p. 95). In other words, they are not rare.

You might think that the question of whether conspiracies are rare depends a great deal on how we define the expression "conspiracy." But in fact it doesn't make much difference. So far, I've been following Popper in thinking of a conspiracy simply as a secret plan on the part of a group of people. But some people have rightly noted that not all such secret plans seem to count as conspiracies. Hence Charles Pigden has suggested that we should add the requirement that the secret plan must be "morally suspect" (Pigden 2006a, p. 157).[4] I myself have come to think that a slightly different tweaking of the definition is called for. Secrecy is not enough for a collective plan to constitute a conspiracy: active deception on the part of the conspirators is required as well. Another possibility is to look at the legal concept of conspiracy and insist that no plan should count as a conspiracy unless it is a plan to do something illegal. There is no need to consider these moves in detail or adjudicate between them here. All of them narrow the extension of the word "conspiracy" somewhat, but not enough to make conspiracies rare (still less nonexistent). Very often secret plans are secret *because* they are plans to do something morally suspect. Very often secret plans involve deception, *because* deception is the only way to preserve secrecy. Very often secret plans are plans to do something illegal, *because* secrecy is required in order not to get caught and punished. On all definitions of conspiracy that have been seriously proposed (at least that I am aware of) conspiracies are common.

Of course, terms like "common," "rare," and "typical" are relative. Conspiracies are rare compared to some things and common compared to others. Presumably some people think conspiracies are more common than in fact they are, but they don't seem to be the people most likely to be castigated as conspiracy theorists. Someone who believed in very few conspiracies, but believed that they are of great importance would be much more likely to attract the pejorative label "conspiracy theorist" than one who believed in more conspiracies, but considered them to be

of little moment. This suggests another way of understanding what is supposed to be wrong with being a conspiracy theorist.

Conspiracies Tend to be Insignificant

Several authors have suggested that conspiracy theorists go wrong, not by overstating the frequency with which conspiracies occur, but by overstating their significance when they do occur. On this view, you can believe in as many conspiracies as you like, so long as you do not believe that they are particularly important. Again, Popper provides some support for this way of understanding who conspiracy theorists are, and what is wrong with being one. He claims that conspiracies do not "change the character of social life" and that, were they to cease "we would still be faced with fundamentally the same problems which have always faced us" (Popper, 1972, p. 342).

But Popper himself effectively admits that conspiracies can be important when he says that "Lenin's revolution, and especially Hitler's revolution and Hitler's war are, I think, exceptions. These were indeed conspiracies" (Popper, 1972, p. 125). With exceptions like these it's hard to put much faith in the rule. Just to be clear, "Lenin's revolution" was The October Revolution, which brought the Bolsheviks to power and created the Soviet Union; "Hitler's revolution" was the revolution which brought the Nazis to power in Germany, and "Hitler's war" was World War II (or at least the European theater of that war). All of these conspiracies have had an enormous impact on "the character of social life" in every country in the world ever since. And it's not as if the "exceptions" Popper mentions are the only ones. Those interested in the enormous impact conspiracies have had just on the twentieth century should consult Pigden (2006b, pp. 34–6). So it is simply not true that we would be faced with "fundamentally the same problems" without conspiracies.

Conspiracies Tend to Fail

Machiavelli once said that "experience demonstrates that there have been many conspiracies, but few have been concluded successfully" (Machiavelli, 1979/1532, p. 62). In a similar vein, Popper claimed

that few "conspiracies are ultimately successful. Conspirators rarely consummate their conspiracy" (Popper, 1962, p. 95). More recently, Daniel Pipes has run a similar line, claiming that "familiarity with the past shows that most conspiracies fail" (1997, p. 39). This suggests that the problem with conspiracy theorists is that they are people who postulate mainly successful conspiracies and that this is irrational. This objection is sometimes conflated with the previous one,[5] but the two objections should be distinguished. A successful conspiracy can be unimportant, and a failed conspiracy can be quite momentous. The failed conspiracy by Soviet generals against Gorbachev in 1991 brought about, or at least hastened, the break-up of the Soviet Union. Likewise the failed conspiracy by Richard Nixon and his associates to cover up a burglary at the Watergate Hotel led to his resignation. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the resignation of Richard Nixon are both, by any standards, momentous historical events.

The idea that conspiracies tend to fail is very widespread and seems to be what a lot of people are getting at when they object to conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists. Conspiracy theories are often contrasted with cock-up theories, with the suggestion that the latter are always, or at least typically, preferable to the former.[6] But, popular though it is, this idea is wrong in two respects. First, conspiracies and cock-ups are not incompatible. A cock-up is a plan or endeavor which fails through incompetence (if I am not trying to do something, I can't cock it up). And since conspiracies are plans of a certain kind, it is perfectly possible to cock them up. Second, although conspiracies have been known to fail, there is no reason to think that they are more prone to failure than other kinds of human endeavor (such as starting a business, making oneself attractive to the opposite sex, or promoting growth in Third World countries). Indeed it's hard to see why people would continue to conspire if the historical record really shows that the activity tends to be pointless or counterproductive. Are conspirators particularly stupid? There seems no reason to think so.

In fact the historical record shows that conspiracies are quite often successful. The conspiracy to assassinate Julius Caesar was successful, as was the conspiracy to assassinate Abraham Lincoln. So too, the coup of Thermidor which struck down the terrorist regime of Robespierre, the 18th Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte, and the October Revolution of 1917. The history of the Byzantine Empire (as of Tsarist Russia) is punctuated with successful palace revolutions, most of them the products of conspiracy.

Perhaps the argument is that such conspiracies are not ultimately successful, since they often have consequences that are neither intended nor wanted by the conspirators. This may be the line Popper and others are running when they accuse conspiracy theorists of ignoring the unintended and/or unwanted consequences of social action. But the fact that conspiracies have unintended and/or unwanted consequences (from the point of view of the conspirators) does not entail that they are peculiarly prone to failure. For *most* (and perhaps all) human actions have unintended and/or unwanted consequences (from the point of view of the actors), but that surely does not entail that most (and perhaps all) human activity is doomed to failure. To suppose that it does would be to lose our grip on the distinction between failure and success.

Is there any reason to suppose that conspiracies are more likely to fail than other things people do? Well you might argue that since secrecy is essential to most definitions of conspiracy,[7] all the conspiracies I have mentioned failed, in as much as they are not secret (after all we know about them); these examples show that there are conspiracies, indeed that there are lots of them and that many of them are important, but they also show that conspiracies tend to fail because they tend to be exposed *in the end*. This seems to be Pete Mandik's reasoning when he denies that the belief that Al-Qaeda blew up the World Trade Center is a conspiracy theory on the grounds that it isn't a secret (Mandik, 2007, pp. 213–14).

The argument that conspiracies tend to fail because they always or usually end up being exposed is mistaken in two ways. First, there is no reason to believe the premise is true. Second, the conclusion does not follow from the premise.

Why accept the premise that conspiracies always or usually end up being exposed? The argument is that all the conspiracies *we know of* are no longer secret, therefore it is reasonable to conclude that conspiracies tend not to remain secret. This is closely parallel to an argument of Berkeley's that nothing exists without thought, because everything you can think of is (at the time in question) being thought of (Berkeley, 1965/1710, p. 75). In both cases there is a clear selection effect operating on the available data. I can't provide you with any examples of objects which are not being thought about, because the process of trying to find examples inevitably involves my thinking about them. Similarly, I can't provide you with any examples of conspiracies that are still completely secret, because if they were still completely secret (and I wasn't in on them), I wouldn't know about them. But this does not

support the claim that there are no such conspiracies, or even the claim that there aren't very many of them.

Even if it were true that conspiracies tend not to remain secret, the conclusion that they tend to fail would not follow. To suppose that it would is to interpret the secrecy required for successful conspiracy in far too strict a way; in such a way in fact that a conspiracy will count as a failure if anyone other than the conspirators ever finds out about it. But conspirators (at least the ones we know about) typically have much more limited aims than that with respect to secrecy. They want to keep their activities secret from some people (usually the targets of the conspiracy and those who might sympathize with them) for some period of time (often only until the deed they are conspiring to do has been done). Indeed many conspiracies *need* to be widely publicized (once the deed is done) if the conspirators are to succeed in their long-range plans. This appears to be the case with the Al-Qaeda conspiracy to blow up the twin towers. The object of the exercise was not just to strike a blow against the Great Satan, but to publicly be seen to have done so. It was certainly the case with the conspiracy to kill Julius Caesar. Brutus and Cassius' plans were secret up to the point where they stabbed Caesar, after which they publicized the deed far and wide (Plutarch, 1999, pp. 356–7).

It is of course possible that there are conspiracies whose success requires permanent secrecy from everyone not involved in the conspiracy. But these are not the kind of conspiracies that those who are castigated as conspiracy theorists believe in. Certainly they don't believe in conspiracy theories of this kind that have been completely successful. They do not believe that the conspiracies they subscribe to have successfully been kept secret from everyone *including them*. To characterize their position in this way would be to suppose that they are straightforwardly inconsistent. And there is no reason (or at least I have never seen any reason) to suppose that even the most irrational of those who are castigated as conspiracy theorists make *this* mistake.

Governments and Government Agencies of Western Countries Don't Conspire Often, Successfully, or Significantly

Just believing in lots of significant and/or successful conspiracies is not usually *on its own* enough to get you accused of being a conspiracy theorist. A great deal depends on whom you attribute the conspiracies to.

No matter how many conspiracies you believe the North Korean regime is involved in, and no matter how important and successful you believe those conspiracies are, no one is likely to call you a conspiracy theorist, unless you also think that Western governments or Western government agencies are involved. So perhaps the error of conspiracy theorists is that they fail to recognize that neither Western governments nor their agents conspire, or that they rarely do, or that it doesn't much matter when they do, or that they rarely achieve their aims when they do.

The US is the most important Western government, and it is typically people's belief in conspiracies by American governments or American government agencies that leads them to be accused of being conspiracy theorists. So we will use the US as a case study. Robert Anton Wilson, who is a fairly typical and widely cited conspiracy baiter, begins his book *Everything Is Under Control: Conspiracies, Cults and Cover-ups* by citing a survey according to which 74 percent of Americans "believe that the U.S. government regularly engages in conspiratorial and clandestine operations." He says that this statistic is significant, because it means that most Americans "now believe what only embittered left-wing radicals believed a century ago" (Wilson, 1998, p. 1).[8] The rest of his book is premised on the assumption that his readers are among the 26 percent who don't believe their government is regularly conspiring and that no argument for this position is required. It is simply assumed that the majority of Americans have become susceptible to "strange" and "paranoid" conspiracy theories.

The statistic Wilson cites is disturbing, but not for the reason he thinks. It is an indictment of the American media and of the American educational system that 26 percent – over a quarter of its citizens – appear to be unaware that their government engages in conspiratorial and clandestine operations on a regular basis. They have obviously never heard of the CIA, or perhaps they think it is a fictional entity regularly used as a plot device on television. Certainly they cannot have read its mission statement, which describes its role as (among other things) "conducting covert action at the direction of the President."[9] What kind of covert action? Since it is covert, our knowledge is limited, but we do know it has included assassination and torture programs in the not too distant past, including the notorious Phoenix Program (Hersh, 1972). We also know that the CIA has played a covert role in the overthrow of several democratic governments, including the government of Iran in 1953 (Weiner, 2007, pp. 81–92), Greece in 1967 (Weiner, 2007, pp. 330–1), and Chile in 1973 (Weiner, 2007, pp. 306–16).

But it is not just the CIA. The 26 percent are presumably also unaware that their government lied to them about the so-called Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964, which was used as a pretext to escalate the war in Vietnam, or the fact that their government regularly lied to them about the strength of the enemy throughout that conflict (Ellsberg, 2002).

Moving right along (and skipping over the Menu bombings, Watergate, and the Iran-Contra affair), it is no longer a secret that the American government regularly kidnaps terrorism suspects and sends them abroad to be tortured (Thompson & Paglen, 2006). But although this is not a secret *now*, it is an operation that was originally planned and conducted in secret, since it contravenes national and international laws. Does "the U.S. government regularly engage in conspiratorial and clandestine operations"? No one familiar with US history could think otherwise.[10]

Conspiracy Theory and the Open Society

It is true, as I have argued elsewhere (Coady, 2006a, p. 10), that in open societies government conspiracies are likely to be both less common and less significant, and there is no question that the US and other Western countries are much more open than some other countries, such as North Korea. But this should not lead us to conclude that governments and government agencies of Western countries don't conspire often, successfully, or significantly, for three reasons. First, openness is a matter of degree. There is no such thing as a completely, or even highly, open society. Second, openness, such as it is, is not the exclusive province of the United States and other Western societies. Some non-Western societies seem to be more open than some Western societies.[11] Third, even in the most open of actually existing societies, conspiracy (including conspiracy by government) is common, important, and often successful.[12]

Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule describe the United States, along with Britain and France, as open societies, and deride conspiracy theorists for being unaware of "the abundant evidence that in open societies government action does not usually remain secret for very long" (2009, pp. 208–9). What does this "abundant evidence" consist in? Sunstein and Vermeule cite two, once secret, facts which have been reported in the American media: first, that the Bush administration illegally spied on American citizens without court orders,[13] and

second that, since September 11, the CIA has been torturing prisoners in secret "black sites."[14]

These examples hardly establish that government conspiracies in America and other putatively open societies don't remain secret very long. The article in the *New York Times*, which revealed the Bush administration's warrantless wire-tapping program, came out approximately four years after that program began. What is more, a careful reading of the article reveals that "after meeting with senior administration officials to hear their concerns, the newspaper delayed publication for a year." It has since emerged that the delay was considerably longer than that; the *New York Times* had the story before the 2004 presidential election.[15] So this is hardly evidence that secretive government action does not stay secret very long. On the contrary, it seems to have stayed secret for as long as the government wanted it to stay secret. Jane Mayer's revelation of a CIA torture program also came out long after, in fact almost six years after, that program began.

You might try arguing that at least these examples constitute evidence that, in open societies such as our own, government secrets will *eventually* be exposed. But these examples do not support even this, much more limited, claim. As we have seen, there is an inevitable selection effect operating on our available data about conspiracies. To argue that conspiracies in Western societies will eventually be exposed, because this or that conspiracy has been exposed, is like arguing, as some criminologists have, that there is a correlation between being a criminal and having a low IQ, based on the fact that prisoners tend to have low IQs. This data is inevitably drawn from a subset of criminals who may well be unrepresentative, the ones who get caught, that is, the unsuccessful ones. Similarly, to the extent that long-term secrecy is essential to the success of conspiracies, the ones we know about will tend to be the unsuccessful ones.[16] We have no reason to believe these are representative.

We have seen that, at least on some readings of what it is to be a conspiracy theorist, the more open one's society is the less one will be justified in being a conspiracy theorist. How can one tell how open one's society is? A range of factors may be taken into consideration. All else being equal, a society will be more open if it has little or no government censorship, if it has effective freedom of information legislation, if it has diversity of media ownership, if it has freedom of internet usage, if the public service is independent of the government and the branches of government are independent of one another, and if

it is rarely in a state of war (since war is commonly used to justify closing a society's channels of communication).

One final factor merits particular attention. All else being equal, a society will be more open to the extent that "conspiracy theorist" and cognates, such as "conspiracist" are not used as terms of abuse. As we've seen, despite the bewildering variety of uses of these expressions, they are standardly used to deride those in Western countries who believe their governments are engaged in conspiracies (or important conspiracies or successful conspiracies, etc.). This usage serves to intimidate and silence such people, whether or not their beliefs are justified, and whether or not they are true. Hence this usage makes it less likely that government conspiracies will be exposed (or exposed in a timely manner), and more likely that the perpetrators will get away with it. So there is reason to think that pejorative uses of these expressions have the effect of making societies in which they occur less open. There is a sad irony in the fact that Popper, the author of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, should have started a practice (the witch hunt against conspiracy theorists) which has made it less likely that conspiracies will be exposed, and so made it easier for conspiracy to thrive at the expense of openness.

My account of the different things people are getting at when they accuse others of being conspiracy theorists was not meant to be complete. Those interested in the variety of uses of the expressions "conspiracy theory" and "conspiracy theorist" should consult my two edited collections on the topic (Coady, 2006a, 2007a). But behind the heterogeneity of uses there is a clear common thread; a person who is accused of being a conspiracy theorist believes, or is interested in investigating, something which conflicts with a view that has achieved a certain status, that of being an officially sanctioned or orthodox view in his or her society. Indeed, the expression is sometimes used of such people, even when their so-called conspiracy theory does not involve a conspiracy (e.g., Coady 2006b, p. 125). Understood in this way, the relationship between conspiracy theories and officialdom is like the relationship between rumors and officialdom, with the difference that rumors are defined as merely lacking official endorsement, whereas conspiracy theories, on this way of understanding them, must actually contradict some official version of events. What if we accepted a definition of "conspiracy theory" along these lines? Would that justify adopting a dismissive attitude toward conspiracy theories? No. As we saw in the last chapter, to say that a version of events has official status

should be seen as epistemically neutral. Hence to say that a conspiracy theory by definition contradicts an official version of events is to say nothing about whether it is true, or whether a person who believes it is justified in doing so. The expressions "conspiracy theory" and "conspiracy theorist" are the respectable modern equivalents of "heresy" and "heretic" respectively; these expressions serve to castigate and ridicule anyone who rejects or even questions orthodox or officially endorsed beliefs.

Conspiracy Baiting as Propaganda

The propagandistic nature of campaigns against conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists is at least as evident as the propagandistic nature of campaigns against rumors and rumor-mongers. Both forms of propaganda serve to herd opinion, or at least "respectable opinion," within limits set by governments and other powerful institutions.

Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule's "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," which was published in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, is a particularly clear example of this. Sunstein and Vermeule tentatively define a conspiracy theory as *"an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)"* (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 205). They concede that some conspiracy theories are true (p. 206), and that some are justified (p. 207). Nonetheless, they propose to focus on the ones that are "false, harmful, and unjustified" (p. 204). Not only do they focus on such "bad conspiracy theories," they repeatedly refer to conspiracy theories as if we could simply assume that they have some or all of these undesirable characteristics. They claim, for example, that "conspiracy theories are a subset of the larger category of false beliefs" (p. 206), and that they are a product of "crippled epistemologies" (p. 224). Hence they not only ignore, but implicitly define out of existence, when it suits them, conspiracy theories that are true, beneficial, and/or justified. Talking about conspiracy theories as if we could just assume they are false, harmful, and unjustified, is, given their definition, tantamount to assuming that explanations which posit secretive behavior on the part of powerful people are false, harmful, and unjustified. We have already seen that not only some, but many, such explanations are both true and justified.

They may still, of course, be harmful. Sunstein and Vermeule are concerned that conspiracy theories can "have pernicious effects from the government's point of view, either by inducing unjustifiably widespread public skepticism about the government's assertions, or by dampening public mobilization and participation in government-led efforts, or both" (2009, p. 220). Is there a point of view, other than that of the government, which might be worth considering, such as that of the citizen? They do not say. Nor do they consider the possibility that widespread public skepticism about the government's assertions might be justified, or that the public might be right not to want to participate in government-led efforts (e.g., efforts to persecute minorities, or attack foreign countries without provocation).

Putting these concerns aside for the moment, what should the government do about the problem of people being unjustifiably skeptical about what it says and unjustifiably reluctant to do what it wants? You might have though that the solution lies in greater openness, honesty, and accountability on the part of government. Sunstein and Vermeule adopt a somewhat different approach. They say their "main policy claim" is that "government should engage in *cognitive infiltration of the groups that produce conspiracy theories*" (2009, p. 218). In this way, government will be able to "undermine the crippled epistemology of believers by planting doubts about the theories" (p. 219). Of course, government agents cannot be entirely open about their participation in such programs; hence Sunstein and Vermeule recommend that "government officials should participate anonymously or even with false identities" (p. 225). In other words, they recommend that government should engage in conspiracies[17] in order to undermine belief in conspiracy theories. Of course, there is a danger that the targets of these proposed government conspiracies will find out about them. Sunstein and Vermeule can hardly dismiss this possibility, since, as we saw, they claim that in open societies, such as the United States, "government action does not usually remain secret for very long" (pp. 208–9). If the targets of Sunstein and Vermeule's proposed conspiracies were to find out about them, they would then believe even more conspiracy theories[18] (albeit true ones) than they did before. This would of course be counterproductive, from government's point of view (which is the only point of view they consider). So what should the government do in these circumstances? It's not absolutely clear what Sunstein and Vermeule would recommend. They do say that "as a general rule, true accounts should not be undermined" (p. 206).

Nonetheless, they regard it as an "interesting question" whether "it is ever appropriate to undermine true conspiracy theories" (fn. 17).

There appears to be a glaring inconsistency between Sunstein and Vermeule's assurances that government can't get away with secrecy in open societies like ours, and their advocacy of government secrecy (and indeed deception). I assume they don't mean to suggest that the cognitive infiltration they recommend is doomed to failure. But mere inconsistency is the least of the worries raised by their paper. Shouldn't we be worried by the prospect of government officials secretively and deceptively manipulating public opinion? Shouldn't we be especially worried when someone like Sunstein, who, as we saw in the previous chapter, is himself an extremely powerful government official, recommends that government officials behave that way? Isn't it possible that government officials might try to undermine, not just false, unjustified, and harmful conspiracy theories, but also true, justified, and/or beneficial ones? Sunstein and Vermeule say that they "assume a well-motivated government that aims to eliminate conspiracy theories, or draw their poison, if and only if social welfare is improved by doing so" (2009, p. 219). But why should we assume government is "well-motivated" or that it will seek to improve "social welfare," rather than its own welfare? What reason can we have for abandoning the defining insight of liberal political thought, namely, that we can't just assume that governments are well-intentioned and will act in our interests rather than their own, especially when it comes to actions that are carried out in secret? All Sunstein and Vermeule have to say in defense of their assumption is that it is "a standard assumption in policy analysis" (p. 219). It is indeed a standard assumption of a certain kind of policy analysis, that known as "government propaganda".

So What Should be Done?

In looking at different ways of understanding what people are getting at when they accuse others of being conspiracy theorists, we have seen that the expression "conspiracy theorist" (like its close relative "conspiracy theory") is multiply ambiguous. What is more, reflection on each of the standard ways of understanding what it is to be a conspiracy theorist shows that there is nothing wrong with being one. In fact, in each case it is those who accuse others of being conspiracy

theorists who are guilty of irrationality (or at least error). What should someone who recognizes this do about it?

The first and most obvious response would be to stop using the expressions, and to discourage others from using them as well. The goal would be to create a world in which the expressions "conspiracy theorist," "conspiracy theory," "conspiracism," and so on, would be recognized as products of an irrational and bigoted outlook. In this world, people would be as ashamed to dismiss a view on the grounds that it is a conspiracy theory, or a person on the grounds that he or she is a conspiracy theorist, as they would be to dismiss a view on the grounds that it is heretical, or a person on the grounds that he or she is a witch.

Of course, attempts to create such a world may not be successful. We can expect them to be resisted by those who find it easier to dismiss people and their views with sound bites than to argue with them or consider the evidence. An alternative strategy should therefore be considered, that of retaining the expression, but without the negative connotations. The words "witch" and "queer" have both come to be used quite widely in nonderogatory ways. In fact, these words have come to be embraced by many of the people who in the past would have been most likely to be maligned as witches or queers. Perhaps the expression "conspiracy theorist" could be transformed in a similar way. Along these lines, I have suggested (Coady, 2007b, 194–6) that it could reasonably be applied to people who have a particular interest in investigating and publicizing conspiracies (when they occur, who is responsible for them, and so on). This conception fits in well with the way we think of other kinds of theorists (e.g., number theorists) as people who have an interest in a particular field of research, rather than as people with particular kinds of beliefs. Conspiracy theorists, in this sense, serve a vitally important social function. In fact, being a conspiracy theorist, in this sense, is an important aspect of the job description of political journalists.[19]

Those who resist either of the strategies I have suggested so far (getting rid of the expression "conspiracy theorist," or retaining it without the negative connotations) will point out quite rightly that some theories which are criticized as conspiracy theories and some people who are criticized as conspiracy theorists deserve to be criticized. We've seen that conspiracies are common, but some people presumably think they're more common than in fact they are. We have seen that conspiracies often succeed, but some people probably think they

succeed more often than in fact they do. We've seen that conspiracies are important, but some people may think that they're more important than in fact they are. Finally, we've seen that conspiracies by governments and government agencies of Western countries, such as the United States, are common, often successful, and often important. But some people almost certainly think they are more common, successful, and/or important than in fact they are.

All these people are making errors, and some of these errors have been arrived at irrationally. What is more, some people sometimes characterize some of these errors as "conspiracy theories" and the people who are most prone to irrationally making these errors as "conspiracy theorists." But this use of nomenclature is extremely misleading. In the first place, we are not talking about a single form of irrationality or error here, but several, and it can only promote confusion to conflate them. In the second place, each of these forms of irrationality or error has an opposite, that is, the irrationality or error of believing that conspiracies are rare, the irrationality or error of believing that conspiracies rarely succeed, the irrationally or error of thinking that conspiracies are unimportant, and so on. We have seen in each case that it is the latter form of irrationality or error that is most widespread and most troubling. Hence it seems that, at least as long as the witch hunt against conspiracy theorists goes on, we need to popularize pejorative expressions to denote those who, in various ways, irrationally dismiss evidence of conspiracy (or evidence of its importance, or evidence of its success, and so on).

To that end, I have suggested (Coady, 2007b, pp. 196–7) popularizing the expression "coincidence theorist," to denote those who, like Hume, are skeptical about inferences "beyond the present testimony of our senses or the records of our memory" (Hume, 1966/1748, p. 26), but who, unlike Hume, do not confine their skepticism to theoretical philosophy. Coincidence theorists are people who fail, as it were, to connect the dots; who fail to see any significance in even the most striking correlations. To give you a sense of the influence of coincidence theory on our political culture, consider the theory that terror alerts in the United States were manipulated for domestic political advantage by the Bush administration. This theory got a lot of publicity when the early Democratic Party front-runner for the 2004 presidential election, Howard Dean, publicly suggested that it might be true. He was immediately denounced as a (you guessed it) "bizarre conspiracy theorist" by President Bush's campaign spokesman Terry Holt.[20] This way of

dismissing Dean and those who agreed with him was immediately picked up, amplified, and repeated uncritically by a variety of voices in the media. As a result, there was no public debate (in the conventional media at least) during that election campaign about whether this conspiracy theory was in fact true. Instead there was a debate about how much the Democratic Party's chances in the election would be hurt by conspiracy theorists like Dean. More than one journalist called on John Kerry, the party's eventual nominee, to denounce Dean's conspiracy theory, which he dutifully did.[21]

Now we know that Dean's conspiracy theory was true. Tom Ridge, former Homeland Security Secretary, has admitted that the Bush administration manipulated the system for domestic political advantage.[22] Pointing to cases like this in which those who posited a conspiracy have been proven right and the coincidence theorists who sneered at them have been proven wrong may go some way to providing some much needed balance to our public debates. But it is a frustrating business. The conventional media silence that has followed Ridge's admission has been almost deafening. One of the very few journalists in the conventional media to make any reference to it at all, Marc Ambinder has said that although journalists, including himself, "were very skeptical when anti-Bush liberals insisted that what Ridge now says is true, was true. We were wrong."[23] But despite admitting that his skepticism and that of his colleagues was factually mistaken, he nonetheless insists that it was warranted, and that those who thought otherwise were unwarranted in their suspicions. The evidence on which this particular conspiracy theory was based before Ridge's confession (for example, the number of occasions bad political news for the Bush administration was followed by a raising of the terror alert, and the regularity with which this in turn was followed by improved Republican polling) does not count. It can all safely be dismissed as coincidence. It appears that on Ambinder's view, conspiracy theories should not be believed, or even investigated, until the conspirators themselves confess. Conspiracy baiters often accuse those they castigate as conspiracy theorists for believing that "There is no such thing as a coincidence" and they are of course right that there is such a thing as being too willing to postulate what Hume called "secret powers" (1966/1748, p. 33) behind observed phenomena. But there is also such a thing as being too reluctant to make inferences beyond what we immediately perceive. Popularizing the expression "coincidence theorist" to denote people who make this error would go some way toward promoting rational public debate.

Coincidence theorists have an irrational tendency to reject clear evidence of conspiracy, but not everyone so inclined is a coincidence theorist. Some people, particularly on the Left, have an irrational tendency to reject clear evidence of conspiracy for quite different reasons. I call them "institutional theorists."[24] A typical example of institutional theory at work can be found in the preface to *Manufacturing Consent*, where Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, anticipating the "accusation" that they are conspiracy theorists, respond preemptively with the claim that they "do not offer any kind of 'conspiracy' hypothesis to explain mass-media performance." Instead, they use "a propaganda model," which seeks to explain mass-media performance in impersonal institutional terms, and as "largely an outcome of market forces" (Herman & Chomsky, 1989, p. xii).[25]

The main problem with this line of thought is that impersonal explanations in terms of institutions and market forces are not inconsistent with conspiratorial explanations. Many institutions owe their existence, at least in part, to conspiracies (think of the United States government's debt to the conspiratorial activities of the founding fathers) and many institutions themselves regularly conspire. Indeed, many institutions do little but conspire (think of the CIA or the KGB). What is more, market forces are not inconsistent with conspiracy. Indeed, as Adam Smith recognized, market forces frequently lead to conspiracy.[26] More generally, institutions and impersonal social forces are not disembodied or abstract entities. They are the result, although not always the intended result, of a lot of intentional activity, much of which is conspiratorial. So an explanation can be, and often is, both conspiratorial and institutional.

At the root of the institutional theorists' critique of conspiracy theorists is a concern not to offer excessively easy solutions to social problems. The worry is that conspiracy theorists encourage the idea that the road to societal improvement consists in the removal of bad people from positions of power, while ignoring the underlying structures that are the real cause of most of our problems (problems which may well include the presence of bad people in positions of power).

While there is certainly something to this concern, the alternative strategy of concentrating on systematic or institutional change comes with its own dangers. First, it can be unrealistic, at least in the short term where most of us live our lives. Second, as history has often demonstrated, the new institutions may be worse than the ones they replaced.

The debate between conspiracy theorists and institutional theorists is reminiscent of the debate George Orwell discussed in his essay on Charles Dickens between "moralists" and "revolutionaries":

> The moralist and the revolutionary are constantly undermining one another. Marx exploded a hundred tons of dynamite beneath the moralist position, and we are still living in the echo of that tremendous crash. But already, somewhere or other, the sappers are at work and fresh dynamite is being tamped in place to blow Marx at the moon. Then Marx, or somebody like him, will come back with yet more dynamite, and so the process continues, to an end we cannot yet foresee. The central problem – how to prevent power from being abused – remains unsolved. Dickens, who had not the vision to see that private property is an obstructive nuisance, had the vision to see that "If men would behave decently the world would be decent" is not such a platitude as it sounds. (Orwell, 1961, p. 48)

We cannot stop power from being abused just by investigating and exposing conspiracies. But we also cannot stop power from being abused if we ignore the fact that much of that abuse is, and probably always will be, conspiratorial.

Conclusion

It has sometimes been suggested that conspiracy theories should be dismissed, because they are "just theories." On this view, conspiracy theories are epistemically suspect because theories are epistemically suspect; by definition one cannot be justified in believing them and one cannot know that they are true. There is no doubt that the word "theory" is sometimes used in a dismissive way, according to which theories are contrasted with facts. On this usage "theory" is roughly synonymous with "speculative hypothesis," but this doesn't seem to be what people who dismiss conspiracy theories mean by the word "theory." If it were, their objection would have nothing to do with conspiracies, and there would be no need to mention them. What is more, they would presumably adopt equally dismissive attitudes to other kinds of theories, such as scientific theories. Typically they don't. Several authors have claimed that intellectuals are particularly likely to be dismissive of conspiracy theories (Clarke, 2006, p. 77; Levy, 2007b, p. 181; Räikkä, 2009, p. 197).

But intellectuals are not likely to be dismissive of theories just for being theories, nor think of theories as things which are by definition unjustified or as things which cannot be known to be true. On the contrary, they typically think of "theory" as an epistemically neutral term, and think that we are justified in believing some of them and that we can know that some of them are true. In this sense, theories are not contrasted with facts, because some theories are facts.

A standard ploy on the part of those who deride conspiracy theories and theorists is to pick a conspiracy theory, argue that it is false and/or that the conspiracy theorists who believe it are irrational or in some other way misguided, and conclude that what is true of this conspiracy theory and these conspiracy theorists is true of conspiracy theories and theorists in general. This is obviously a fallacious form of argument. What needs to be shown is not that there are conspiracy theories and theorists with certain undesirable characteristics, but that there is a connection between being a conspiracy theory or theorist and these undesirable characteristics. What needs to be shown, in other words, is that the theories or theorists have the undesirable characteristics *because* they are conspiracy theories or theorists.

Jill LeBlanc (1998, pp. 192–4), for example, argues (in a critical thinking text book of all things) that people who believe that the United States government is conspiring to keep the public unaware of contact with alien species at Roswell, New Mexico, are committing certain identifiable reasoning fallacies. Whether or not she is right about this, she is certainly wrong when she goes on to assert without argument that these fallacies are characteristic of conspiracy theorists. This is no different from arguing that a certain foreigner is irrational and concluding from this that irrationality is characteristic of foreigners. In a similar way, Steve Clarke (2007) argues against the "controlled demolition theory" of the collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11, and simply assumes that the flaws of this particular conspiracy theory are characteristic of conspiracy theories in general. This is like assuming that the flaws of phlogiston theory (for example the fact that it is false) are characteristic of scientific theories in general.

The invalidity of this species of reasoning in the case of theories about the collapse of the World Trade Center should be particularly evident, because all theories of this event are inevitably conspiracy theories, at least on most definitions of "conspiracy theory," including Clarke's.

After all, the World Trade Center clearly collapsed because of some conspiracy or the other. As Pigden has noted, it's hard to imagine what it would be like not to believe a conspiracy theory in this case:

> you would have to suppose that the perpetrators assembled in the planes quite by chance and that, on a sudden, by coincidence, it struck them all as a neat idea to hijack the planes and ram them into the Twin Towers, the Whitehouse and the Pentagon, with the aid of other perpetrators who, presumably, they had never met before. (Pigden, 2006a, p. 158)

When all accounts of an event are conspiracy theories, why should we assume that false and unjustified ones are characteristic of the kind, rather than (say) true and justified ones?

Of course, many people will be reluctant to describe the theory which Clarke calls "the Al Qaeda Theory" as a conspiracy theory. But it's not at all clear that they can justify their reluctance. They cannot justify it on the grounds that this so-called theory is a fact rather than a theory, for, as we have seen, being a theory is compatible with being a fact. They could try justifying their reluctance by pointing out that the Al Qaeda Theory has official status, and stipulating that this means it cannot be a conspiracy theory. But, whatever you think of this semantic move, it doesn't give us a reason for preferring the Al Qaeda theory to the controlled demolition theory. As we have seen, to say that a theory contradicts an official version of events is to say nothing about whether it is true, or whether it should be believed. I happen to think that Clarke makes a good case against controlled demolition theory and those who believe it. But the case has nothing to do with it being a conspiracy theory or them being conspiracy theorists. They are not wrong because they believe in the existence of conspiracies, or lots of conspiracies, or important or successful conspiracies, or because they believe in conspiracies by the United States government or its agents, or because they believe something which contradicts an official version of events. They are wrong, because they believe in something (something which in this case just happens to be a conspiracy), which is not supported by the available evidence.

I am not alone in defending conspiracy theories.[27] However, some authors who present themselves as defenders of conspiracy theories have internalized some of the presuppositions of the conspiracy baiters. I will conclude with a discussion of how my position differs from theirs.

Lee Basham defends conspiracy theories against many criticisms, but he also ends up rejecting conspiracy theories, albeit on pragmatic, rather than epistemic, grounds:

> A more solid ground for the rejection of conspiracy theories is simply pragmatic. *There is nothing you can do.* While it would be speculative (but reasonable) to conclude that this is why many people dismiss conspiracy theory, it is a considerable reason why we *should*. (Basham, 2006a, p. 74)

In another article, Basham appeals to "the 'get a life' principle" (2006b, p. 104) in support of this position. But Basham surely cannot mean to dismiss *all* conspiracy theories on these grounds. There are often things we can do about conspiracies (depending to some extent of course on who "we" are). For example, we may be able to expose one; we may, that is, be able to persuade others that a true conspiracy theory is true. This is something good investigative journalists do for a living. But it is also something all concerned citizens should be prepared to do in cases of heinous conspiracies that they have good reason to believe in.

It is possible that Basham's pragmatic rejection of conspiracy theories is only meant to apply to the most extreme imaginable conspiracy theories, those that postulate what he calls "malevolent global conspiracies" (Basham, 2006b). These conspiracy theories postulate conspirators who are so powerful that it is impossible for anyone who is not a co-conspirator to know there is a conspiracy. Now Basham is certainly right that there is nothing one could do about malevolent global conspiracies, understood in this way. You can't foil conspiracies if you can't know they exist. Conspiracy theories of this kind are a form of radical skeptical hypothesis, like the evil demon and brain-in-a-vat hypotheses that philosophers have been grappling with for centuries. Whatever you think of these hypotheses, they are not conspiracy theories as we know them. The conspirators of actual conspiracy theories, justified and unjustified, true and false, are not omnipotent. Their conspiracies can be seen through (that is what the conspiracy theorists believe themselves to have done), and thwarted (that is often what the conspiracy theorists hope to do). Hence our impotence in the face of Basham's malevolent global conspiracies cannot be the reason many people reject conspiracy theories, because few people have heard of any such conspiracies. Even the examples of conspiracy theories which Basham uses to illustrate his argument do not postulate

malevolent global conspiracies in the required sense. For example, Basham asks us to imagine that we are told that a group of Freemasons, or the Council of Foreign Relations, is secretly ruling the planet. The conspirators of these theories are not omnipotent beings, but flesh-and-blood humans, and there would inevitably be limits to their ability to keep their activities secret in the face of determined investigation. Most of the readers of this book either have, or could easily find, evidence that these theories are false.

Juha Räikkä also defends conspiracy theories, or at least a class of conspiracy theories he calls "political conspiracy theories," against a variety of criticisms, and concludes that "political conspiracy theories may not be much weaker than standard non-conspiratorial explanations of political events" (Räikkä, 2009, p. 198). But this "defense" of political conspiracy theories wrongly presupposes that political conspiracy theories are weaker (albeit not necessarily by much) than their rivals. As we have seen, political conspiracy theories, like other conspiracy theories, are often much stronger than their nonconspiratorial rivals; indeed their nonconspiratorial rivals are often obviously false, while they are obviously true. It's not clear to me what Räikkä means by describing the rivals to political conspiracy theories as "standard," but I suspect he means something like "official." It is quite common to contrast conspiracy theories with their official nonconspiratorial rivals, but, as we have seen, the official version of events can be just as conspiratorial as its rivals (indeed it can be more so). When this is the case, it is the unofficial explanation that will inevitably attract the label "conspiracy theory," with all its undeserved negative connotations.

The association between conspiracy theorizing and irrationality is so deeply entrenched in our culture that when people hear that I defend conspiracy theorists and theories they often assume that I must be defending irrationality. I am not. I am defending conspiracy theorists and theories against accusations of irrationality (along with a variety of other accusations). Unfortunately, some would-be defenders of conspiracy theorizing have embraced a form of irrationalism. This is evident in the following passage from an academic collection on conspiracy theories:

> these authors treat conspiracy ideas, near and far, as discourses that construct truths in contradistinction to the (also constructed) truths of discourses of transparency. Although recognizing that those making the transparency argument often hold considerably more power than

> those left to suspect these claims the authors level the epistemological playing field between these truth-asserting endeavors. (West & Sanders, 2003, p. 15)[28]

I also want to "level the epistemological playing field." But it is misguided to think that the way to do this is by adopting the relativist position that conflicting social explanations are "constructed truths," equally valid for different communities of believers. If a conspiracy theory contradicts another theory, then at least one of the two theories is false. Nothing can be said *a priori* about which it is. The only way to find out is by listening to arguments and examining evidence.

Notes

1 This chapter began as a collaborative project with Charles Pigden. We had intended to write a joint paper which for various reasons never came to fruition. My thanks to Dr Pigden for his permission to incorporate many of his thoughts and words into this chapter. I am, of course, responsible for any errors.

2 John Ayto (1999, p. 15) cites a use of the expression "conspiracy theory" from 1909. It appears that it did not, at that time, have negative connotations. Apart from this single example, I have been unable to find any uses of the expression which predate Popper.

3 I thank Charles Pigden for this pithy and accurate way of characterizing the conspiracy theory of society.

4 On Pigden's account something can be morally suspect without actually being immoral.

5 Pipes, for example, does not clearly distinguish these objections.

6 Bernard Ingham, Chief Press Secretary to Mrs Thatcher, is the classical source for this contrast: "Many journalists have fallen for the conspiracy theory of government. I do assure you that they would produce more accurate work if they adhered to the cock-up theory" (quoted in the *Brisbane Times*, September 1, 1999).

7 The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists an archaic usage, which makes no reference to secrecy. According to it, a conspiracy is simply a "union or combination (of persons or things) for one end or purpose."

8 I doubt whether Wilson is right that a century ago only "embittered left-wing radicals" believed that their government was engaged in regular conspiratorial and covert operations. But if he is right and the majority did have more faith then that their government was open and above-board, then the majority was wrong and the embittered left-wing radicals were right.

9 https://www.cia.gov/about-cia/cia-vision-mission-values/index.html. Accessed December 11, 2010.
10 I do not mean to imply that the US is unique or even unusual in this way.
11 The 2010 Press Freedom Index, compiled by Reporters Without Borders, which ranks countries on the basis of their respect for freedom of the press, rates the United States 20th, behind Estonia, Japan, Lithuania, and Malta. France is ranked 44th, well behind Namibia, Ghana, Mali, and many other non-Western countries.
12 I will not address the question of whether a completely open society in which we could be sure governments could not get away with conspiring would be desirable, since we can be sure that no actual society is or ever will be that open.
13 James Risen and Eric Lichtblau, "Bush lets U.S. spy on callers without courts," *New York Times*, December 16, 2005, p. A1.
14 Jane Mayer, "The black sites: a rare look inside the C.I.A.'s secret interrogation program," *New Yorker*, August 13, 2007, p. 46.
15 http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war_room/2006/08/14/times. Accessed December 11, 2010.
16 I have made a closely related point before (Coady, 2006a, p. 5).
17 Sunstein and Vermeule's proposals constitute conspiracies on any of the definitions considered so far, and any definition that I have ever come across. The cognitive infiltration they recommend not only involves secrecy and deception, it is obviously "morally suspect," to put it very mildly, since it involves dishonestly manipulating people's opinions. What is more, it appears to be illegal, under statutes which prohibit the government from engaging in "covert propaganda" which is defined as "information which originates from the government but is unattributed and made to appear as though it came from a third party." See http://www.prwatch.org/node/7261. Accessed December 11, 2010.
18 To believe that the government is engaged in secretive and deceptive cognitive infiltration is to believe a conspiracy theory, on Sunstein and Vermeule's own definition and also on every other definition that I'm familiar with.
19 This is meant as a normative claim. Too often political journalists do not see their role this way. I will have more to say about the role of political journalism in the next chapter.
20 http://swampland.blogs.time.com/2009/08/20/color-coded-con-job/a Accessed December 11, 2010.
21 http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/08/02/politics/main633561.shtml. Accessed December 11, 2010.
22 http://politics.usnews.com/news/blogs/washington-whispers/2009/08/19/tom-ridge-on-national-security-after-911.html. Accessed December 11, 2010.

23 http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2009/08/dont-cry-for-tom-ridge/23574. Accessed December 11, 2010.
24 This is a deliberate echo of the concept of "institutional analysis," which is often explicitly contrasted with "conspiracy theory." Institutional analysis of course has positive connotations, at least among those who practice it.
25 Despite their attempts to assure their readers, many were not convinced. Nicholas Lemann in a review in *The New Republic* insisted that "*Manufacturing Consent* really is a conspiracy theory" (Lemann, 1989, p. 36). The truth is that *Manufacturing Consent* does offer numerous "conspiracy hypotheses" (many of which are very plausible and some of which are obviously true). However, it is not itself a conspiracy theory.
26 "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public" (Smith, 1910/1776, Book I, Chapter X).
27 Charles Pigden is a particularly good ally in this campaign.
28 Jodi Dean (1998) seems to adopt a similar position.