Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction

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1. Introduction

The philosophical interest in political conspiracy theories is a rather recent phenomenon. Although philosophers have always been interested in conspiracies—Niccolò Machiavelli and David Hume, for example, studied them—not much has been written about conspiracy *theories*. However, conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing have recently gathered a considerable amount of attention among a number of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, history, law, psychology and political science. This special issue of *Argumenta* delves into the ethical and epistemological questions of political conspiracy theories. The authors of the papers are philosophers, social scientists and psychologists. Some of the topics discussed are conceptual and theoretical while others are primarily normative and also empirical. This collection aims to further the recent debates concerning the rationality, ethical acceptability and nature of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing.

Conspiracy theories raise both ethical and epistemic questions. The correct understanding of the epistemic status of conspiracy theories is important not only for intellectual reasons but also for practical reasons. One can pass off fanciful explanations with a laugh but potentially correct explanations deserve serious attention, especially if failing to notice them may lead to grave social consequences. Conspiracy theories may have an important function in democratic societies, and conspiracy theorists and investigative journalists may help to maintain social openness and make potential conspirators think twice. However, it is important to notice that conspiracy theories may also have adverse effects when they are made public. Conspiracy theorizing can be harmful, given that a theory or theories (e.g. about vaccination or global warming) are accepted by many people and the acceptance influences their behavior. Many authors have followed Karl Popper's famous criticism and pointed out that conspiracy theories tend to be unwarranted.[1] No matter how convincingly conspiracy theorists try to

[1] Modern debate on conspiracy theories started when Karl Popper (1902-1994) criticized what he called the conspiracy theory of society, namely the claim that "all results, even those which at first sight do not seem to be intended by anybody, are the intended results of the actions of people who are interested in these results" (Popper 2013: 307). In 1999 Brian L. Keeley published a paper titled "Of Conspiracy Theories" in *The Journal of Philosophy* and, after that, the philosophical debate on conspiracy theories has largely cen-

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defend their cases, their theories are usually considered less plausible than the received explanations, supported by relevant epistemic authorities. As far as the epistemic authorities deserve their position, the burden of proof is on the side of conspiracy theorists.

This collection consists of seven papers dedicated to the study of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing. In the first paper Stephan Lewandowsky, Elisabeth A. Lloyd and Scott Prophy argue that non-conventional forms of cognition, such as conspiracist ideation and belief in the paranormal, are poor as truth-tracking devices. The point is that actual conspiracies are usually identified by conventional cognition, whereas non-existent conspiracies are the domain of conspiracist cognition. In the second paper Joseph Uscinski aims to show that conspiracy theories should be treated with skepticism but not as wrong or false *per se*, as conspiracy theories have unique epistemological properties which shield them from falsification. Still, conspiracy theories may be necessary to the healthy functioning of society. Marion Vorms and Philippe Huneman argue in the third paper that conspiracy theories are very heterogeneous and that the prospects of a unified account of conspiracy theories are very low. Lee Basham discusses the epistemic problem of *toxic truths* in the fourth paper. "Toxicity" is the likelihood that some conspiratorial scenarios are too "toxic" for our usual institutions of public information to disseminate to the public, or even pursue. Basham argues that cover-up via intentional neglect poses a significant threat to a functioning democracy. In the fifth paper David Coady compares conspiracy theories to scientific theories and argues that just as most of us regard bad scientific theories (i.e. the false, unjustified and harmful ones) as an acceptable price to pay for good scientific theories, we should regard bad conspiracy theories as an acceptable price to pay for the good ones. In the sixth paper, Kurtis Hagen deals with the question whether conspiracy theories operate within "monological belief systems", in which conspiracy theorists find support for their conspiratorial beliefs in other conspiratorial beliefs, or in related generalizations, rather than in evidence directly relevant to the conspiracy in question. Hagen argues that such a claim is either wrong or misleading. In the final paper, Matthew Dentith's contention is that we cannot use a sub-set of conspiracy theorists—the conspiracists—as a reason to be suspicious of conspiracy theorizing in general, and that the faults of the conspiracists are—should such theorists even exist—overrated.

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tered upon the question of whether the acceptance of particular conspiracy theories commits conspiracy theorists to a view that public institutions, companies and media are untrustworthy in general, and whether it is problematic if it does. Keeley (1999: 116-118) argued that it is usually irrational to believe in conspiracy theories, as they entail "an almost nihilistic degree of skepticism about the behavior and motivations of other people and the social institutions they constitute". Critics have opposed the argument by denying that belief in a conspiracy theory entails "skepticism", and by claiming that skepticism of "people and institutions" is actually unproblematic, as we have excellent historical reasons *not* to trust in public institutions and authorities.

I would like to start the discussion by considering briefly the question whether the state should have an active role in debates concerning political conspiracy theories. While the recent discussion on conspiracy theories has been mainly theoretical and research oriented, some contributions have been rather practical in the sense that their aim has been to tell what kinds of actions the authorities should undertake in order to struggle *against* conspiracy theories, in particular, conspiracy theories that are considered to be potentially harmful. Some authors have defended the claim that, in certain circumstances, the dissemination of some conspiracy theories should be prohibited by law (Lavik 2015). Others have claimed that the state should secretly intervene in groups that develop and disseminate those theories. Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009: 219), for instance, have defended "a cognitive infiltration of extremist groups". Gérald Bronner (2016), Karen Douglas and others have argued that conspiracism "is indeed a problem that must be taken seriously, one which requires a proper response". They do not mention legal prohibitions or secret action, but they share the idea that the state should actively struggle against conspiracy theories.

How we should deal with conspiracy theories? In what follows I will briefly evaluate the idea that the state should take an active role in debates concerning political conspiracy theories. I will argue that if we want to evaluate the demand that the state authorities should fight against political conspiracy theories, then it is important to know what exactly conspiracy theories are. As far as the demand for state action concerns claims that are *ordinarily called* conspiracy theories, then we need an understanding of what kinds of claims are normally called conspiracy theories. I will argue that *if* we adopt the ordinary understanding of the notion of conspiracy theory, then the idea that the state should prevent or influence open political debates does not sound desirable. According to ordinary language, conspiracy theories are every now and then true. Therefore the idea of preventing their public and open analysis sounds dangerous—even if we accept the fact that some conspiracy theories can be potentially harmful. Those who defend state action against conspiracy theorizing tend to claim that they are interested only in *false* conspiracy theories. However, in what follows, I will try to point out that it is often rather difficult to tell which conspiracy theories are false, and not only believed to be false. People are not infallible, and history proves that some conspiracy theories that were considered highly implausible have actually been true. Therefore, the idea that the state should actively intervene in public discussions seems problematic, although the authorities can ensure that the views of the scientific community receive enough publicity, and that people have sufficient skills to interpret media, and so on. The state need not be passive but it should not intervene in open political debates.

2. Characterizing Conspiracy Theories: Three Methods

Let us start with the issue of definition. Roughly speaking, there have been three different ways to define or characterize the notion of conspiracy theory. First, a definition can *narrow* the meaning of "conspiracy theory" and restrict it more than its ordinary usage suggests. Second, a definition can *expand* the meaning of the concept and make it refer to things that are not usually called conspiracy theories. Finally, a definition can try to catch the ordinary meaning of the concept, as accurately as possible. The third option is what we should try to do

here, given that the demand for state action concerns theories that are ordinarily called conspiracy theories. But let us briefly consider each of these methods.

1. The idea of narrowing the meaning of "conspiracy theory" is commonly used among social psychologists. Viren Swami and his group, for instance, describe conspiracy theories as a "subset of false beliefs in which the ultimate cause of an event is believed to be due to a plot by multiple actors working together with a clear goal in mind, often unlawfully and in secret" (Swami *et al*. 2014: 572). Karen Douglas and Robbie Sutton have called conspiracy theories "fanciful alternatives to mainstream accounts" (Douglas and Sutton 2011: 544). These characterizations are understandable and useful in the sense that psychologists are often particularly interested in irrational beliefs and want to study their causes.

However, it is clear that many conspiracy theories have turned out to be warranted and true. There is nothing irrational or fanciful in believing, say, in the Watergate conspiracy theory. When asked whether we should fight against conspiracy theories, most people understand the issue as a question concerning explanations that are *usually called conspiracy theories*. Obviously, ordinary language allows that some conspiracy theories are true.

2. Some philosophers have suggested that we should actually expand the meaning of "conspiracy theory" and reject its ordinary usage. Lee Basham, for instance, argues that "any explanation of events that includes a conspiracy as a salient cause" should be called "conspiracy theory".[2] The motivation for such a move is not completely clear but perhaps the defenders of the "analytic definition" suspect that ordinary people use the notion of conspiracy theory "wrongly" (whatever that could mean) or that the concept does not really have an "ordinary" meaning. Or perhaps they would like to redefine "conspiracy theory" in order to release the concept from its pejorative connotations (cf. Husting and Orr 2007; see also Wood 2016). Or maybe they want to expand the meaning of "conspiracy theory" to include all historical explanations that refer to conspiracies, as then the claim that "conspiracy theories are often warranted" would be true.

Basham's and others' approach is interesting. However, it is one thing to try to say something about explanations that are usually called conspiracy theories and another thing to say something about *all explanations* that refer to (actual or alleged) plots and conspiracies. History textbooks are full of stories that mention the term "conspiracy". But the textbooks do not describe explanations that are usually called conspiracy theories. Obviously, in ordinary language "conspiracy theory" does not refer to *all* explanations that include term "conspiracy". For instance, to say that the events of September 11th in 2001 were due to a conspiracy on the part of al-Qaeda is not to support a conspiracy theory. Similarly, to write a newspaper article saying that six security agents were arrested in Kabul in 2011 as they conspired to assassinate President Hamid Karzai is not to defend a conspiracy theory (as far as we follow the rules of ordinary language). Of course, the question of when it is appropriate to explain political events by referring to plots may be interesting in its own right—as argued for instance by Matthew Dentith (2016)—but not all explanations that refer to plots and conspiracies are normally called conspiracy theories. The question of whether the state should actively fight against conspiracy theories does not concern all explana-

[2] Basham 2016: 6-7; see also Pigden 2007: 222; Dentith 2016.

tions that include term "plot" or "conspiracy". *Nobody* would say that the state should prevent publishing usual historical explanations that include term "conspiracy". And *nobody* would say that newspapers should not write about the Volkswagen emission scandal, even if the news may include the word "conspiracy".[3]

3. The question how the concept of a "conspiracy theory" is commonly used is empirical, and the usage of the concept may vary in different times and cultures. It is unlikely that ordinary language analysis provides us with a universal definition of "conspiracy theory".[4] The gray area (where we are uncertain whether an explanation is a conspiracy theory or not) is large. Furthermore, the common usage of the concept is hardly completely coherent. Still, there are many clear cases in which we are confident that an explanation *is* a political conspiracy theory and, similarly, there are many clear cases in which we are confident that an explanation is *not* a political conspiracy theory, even though it may refer to a plot. By studying the clear cases we can try to say something general about the ordinary language meaning of the concept. When we have a picture of the ordinary language meaning of "conspiracy theory", we are prepared to reply to a more substantial question of how to deal with them, that is, with theories that are commonly called conspiracy theories.

Of course, to tell how the notion of conspiracy theory is commonly used is not necessarily to tell what "conspiracy theory" *really* means. But as far as we are interested in the practical question of how the state should deal with theories that are commonly called conspiracy theories, it is more or less irrelevant what the concept *really* means—if the concept has a "true meaning" in the first place.[5] Granted that we are indeed interested in how the state should deal with theories that are commonly called conspiracy theories, we should not narrow or expand the ordinary meaning of the notion of conspiracy, whether or not such solutions (or the other of them) would move us closer to the true meaning of "conspiracy theory".

3. Taxonomy of Conspiracy Theories

It is useful to distinguish between (a) warranted conspiracy theories, (b) rejected conspiracy theories, (c) so-called deceptive conspiracy theories, and (d) open conspiracy theories. I will give an example of each of them. They are all explanations of political events and refer to (actual or alleged) secret intentional actions, in particular to plots, and are rather commonly called conspiracy theories.

(a) The Watergate theory is an example of a warranted (and true) conspiracy theory. The theory revealed that President Nixon was indirectly involved in the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate

[3] We should not try to define "pineapple" by defining first "pine" and then "apple". Similarly, it is not advisable to try to define the notion of conspiracy theory by defining first "conspiracy" and then "theory". That kind of method would lead to unsatisfactory results in all likelihood.

[4] Cf. Marion Vorms' and Philippe Huneman's paper in this journal.

[5] Ludwig Wittgenstein writes in his *Philosophical Investigations* (section 43) that for "a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language".

complex. Nixon's administration attempted to conceal its involvement, but failed.[6]

(b) A theory that a group of conspirators sent Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin to the palace of Tsar Nikolai II in order to ruin the reputation of the Tsar and his family (cf. Burnett 2005: 44) is an example of a rejected conspiracy theory. The theory no longer has supporters, and its truth is politically more or less irrelevant. The received view among historians is that the Tsar's enemies had nothing to do with the fact that Rasputin was able to reach a high position in the royal family. (Notice that rejected conspiracy theories are unlikely to be true, but it is not impossible that they are true.)

(c) The global warming conspiracy theory is an example of a deceptive conspiracy theory, at least when it is defended by the representatives of the oil industry or their allies. According to the theory, the scientists who study global warming have secretly agreed that they publish false results in order to get more funding for their research projects. As far as the defenders think that theory is unwarranted and propagate it only because of political and financial reasons, the theory is a usual deceptive conspiracy theory. (Of course, it is possible that a deceptive theory is true, although those who disseminate it believe that it is false.)

(d) The genetically modified food conspiracy theory is an example of an open conspiracy theory. According to the theory, agribusiness enterprises have concealed the data that prove that GM food causes serious health problems. Companies and health authorities have denied the claims. Many people think that "open" conspiracy theories are actually false theories—and in many cases they are probably right—but it is better to talk about open rather than false theories, as public opinion and epistemic authorities are not infallible. (Notice that deceptive conspiracy theories are usually open theories, but not all open conspiracy theories are deceptive. Open conspiracy theories are genuinely believed by at least some people, but are not strong enough to be considered warranted.)

The list of open political conspiracy theories is almost endless. Open theories include those that deal with 9/11, JFK, Olof Palme's murder, Princess Diana's death, vaccination, Jews, AIDS, black death, climate engineering, scientist David Kelly's death, Pearl Harbor, and so on. But let us concentrate on the four examples mentioned above.

4. An Ordinary Language Meaning of "Conspiracy Theory"

There are two key features that seem to be common to all the four theories (Watergate, Rasputin, global warming and GM food). Call them (1) the conflict criterion and (2) the conspiracy criterion.

1. The conflict criterion. Usually an explanation is called a conspiracy theory only if it conflicts or has conflicted with a received explanation of the same political event (cf. Coady 2003: 199). As far as an explanation is a conspiracy theory, it does not completely track the (present, past, or future) claims of the relevant *ep-*

[6] When a conspiracy theory turns out to be true, some people cease to call it conspiracy theory. Cf. Räikkä 2009; Räikkä 2014: 63.

istemic authority (such as mainstream media, scientific community, state authorities, or professional historians).[7] The Watergate theory conflicted with the official story of Nixon's administration; the Rasputin theory conflicted with the Russian explanation of the time and still conflicts with the received view among historians; the global warming conspiracy theory conflicts with the view of the relevant scientific community; and the GM food conspiracy theory conflicts with the view of health authorities. In most cases, conspiracy theorists suspect *two separate groups*. On the one hand, they suspect a group of people who are claimed to be conspirators. On the other hand, they suspect a group of people who form the relevant epistemic authority and deny the alleged conspiracy. (In certain specific cases, the epistemic authority is accused of a conspiracy.) To question the position of an epistemic authority *in a special case* does mean that its position is questioned in general.[8]

We can distinguish between conspiracy theories and what can be called *conspiracy explanations*. Conspiracy explanations do not conflict and have not conflicted with the views of the relevant epistemic authorities, and they are not usually called conspiracy theories (I assume), although they do refer to (actual or alleged) conspiracies or plots. Consider the following examples:

Explosion. A bomb exploded in July 1944 in East Prussia, as a group of conspirators attempted to assassinate Hitler.

Attempted Coup. The armed conflict in Turkey in the summer of 2016 was due to an attempted military coup and a conspiracy against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his administration.

The claim that there was a conspiracy against Hitler has not been denied. The claim about the military coup has been denied, but this claim is the official version of the events in the summer of 2016 and is supported, for instance, by the international news media and independent political commentators. So the explanation does not conflict with the views of the relevant epistemic authorities.

The notion of conspiracy theory is a bit like the notion of "radical claim". The contention that women should not have the vote in national elections was *not* considered to be a radical claim in 1890. The claim was rather commonly accepted, and hence it was not radical. However, *now* we can say that "the *radical claim* that women should not have the vote was very common in 1890". We can meaningfully say this, as the claim is not commonly accepted today. The similar logic applies to the notion of conspiracy theory. The claim that there is a Jewish conspiracy against Christians was an official truth in Germany during the World War II, and those who supported the claim were not necessarily considered supporting a conspiracy theory. However, *now* we can say that many Germans supported a Jewish conspiracy theory during the war. The reason why we can say so is simple: today the claim conflicts with the received view of history. Therefore it is called a conspiracy theory.

[7] The official explanation, supported by the administrative authorities, need not be supported by the relevant epistemic authorities. It is possible that state authorities support a conspiracy theory, i.e. an explanation which is not supported by the epistemic authority. Notice that new conspiracy theories need not literally conflict with the received views, but they are *not supported* by the received views.

[8] For a discussion, see Levy 2007; Zagzebski 2012; Dentith 2016.

Notice that a feature that explanations which are usually counted as conspiracy theories would appear to share is that a conspiracy theory would get (or had got) much media attention were it shown to be true (or when it has been proven true) and, in usual cases, the news would surprise most people, at least to some extent. The Watergate scandal, for instance, got huge attention in the media. Had the theory of Rasputin proved to be true, it would have led to shocking surprise among Russians. Suppose that someone shows that, actually, the global warming conspiracy theory or the GM food conspiracy theory is correct. That would cause massive media attention globally, and millions of people would be surprised—although some people would certainly say that they *knew* how things are.

There are many conspiracy explanations (as distinguished from conspiracy theories) that would not gather media attention and would not surprise relevant audiences even if they were shown to be true. They would hardly be called conspiracy theories. Again, let us consider some examples:

Prison. Three prisoners met a couple of times, as they had a secret plan to carry out a robbery immediately after their release from prison.

University. A person got a professorship because a group of people had secretly decided to fix the relevant processes so that she would get the position.

To claim that a group of prisoners is planning a new crime is not a defense of a conspiracy theory, however secret their plan is supposed to be. If the claim turned out to be true, it would not cause massive media attention. The claim about university corruption would probably go against the official story (of the Faculty), but it would not necessarily conflict with the view of the relevant epistemic authority or tacit knowledge of the scientific community. It is easy to imagine circumstances in which its truth would not surprise many of us. In certain circumstances, the claim would not get much attention, given that the person in question is not a public figure or a person of public interest. In the professorship example people do not really trust the official story. We could say that, in this case, the official side does not get (sufficient) support from the relevant epistemic authority. Therefore people are not surprised when the story turns out to be false.[9]

2. The Conspiracy Criterion. The second feature of the explanations which are usually counted as conspiracy theories would appear to share is that they refer to (actual or alleged) conspiracies or plots.[10] In some cases it may be difficult to say whether an explanation refers to a "conspiracy" rather than to some other sort of confidential cooperation. However, secret cooperative activities whose aims and nature conflict with the so-called positive morality (that reflects our *de facto* moral commitments) or with specific *prima facie* duties are usually called "conspiracies", especially if the members of the cooperation have a certain position,

[9] The claim that the representatives of oil industry have secretly agreed to disseminate false information is not a conspiracy theory, as it is generally known that they (or their allies) disseminate it. (Cf. Lavik 2015.) Major news stories do get much media attention, but they do not usually conflict with the views of the relevant epistemic authorities, although the news may *reform* those views. A conspiracy theory may also reform the views of the epistemic authority, but this takes time.

[10] I say "usually", as many claims that concern alleged activities of UFOs are often counted as "conspiracy theories", although they do *not* always refer to conspiracies or plots.

and if the goal of their activities differs from the goal they are authorized to pursue. Children may have morally questionable secret plans to influence events by secret means, but these incidents are seldom called conspiracies. Small children are not considered to be in a position to conspire. Secret military operations may be morally rotten, but as far as they have authorized goals, they are not usually called conspiracies. The members of an "official" administrative meeting behind closed doors may secretly agree on issues they should not and start to pursue goals they should avoid. When this happens the participants can rightfully be accused of conspiracy, as they have unauthorized goals now. Conspiracies involve secret cooperation, but that does not mean that the conspirators must meet secretly, so that outsiders do not know that they meet in the first place.[11]

To say that a group of people "conspired" is not to say that their secret cooperation was, all things considered, wrong. Operation Valkyrie was a conspiracy, as assassinations are *prima facie* wrong. However, there are many who would say that the members of the plot that aimed to murder Hitler had an excellent moral justification for their plan. The Irangate conspiracy was a conspiracy and an illegal fraud, but some people think that what President Reagan did was, all things considered, morally acceptable. Possibly, they think that Reagan was a great patriot and republican who truly dedicated himself to his political ideals. Thus it is possible to believe in a conspiracy theory (such as the Irangate conspiracy theory) without thinking that the alleged conspirators' (such as Reagan and his allies) actions were, all things considered, bad. It is clear that conspirators need not have "nefarious intentions" (*pace* Keeley 1999: 117). In many cases, the members of the conspiring group think that their plan is morally acceptable—despite the fact that the plan clearly conflicts with the demands of the prevalent positive morality.[12]

Explanations that satisfy both the conflict criterion and the conspiracy criterion are usually called conspiracy theories, while the explanations that do not satisfy the criteria or satisfy only one of them are usually not called conspiracy theories.

5. Fight Against Conspiracy Theories?

I will finish my discussion by evaluating the claim that the state should have an active role in the debates concerning conspiracy theories. Given that the claim that the state should be active in conspiracy debates concerns theories that are ordinarily called conspiracy theories, and given that the ordinary language understanding of "conspiracy theory" allows that conspiracy theories are sometimes warranted and true, the idea that the state should intervene in open democratic debates does not sound desirable. The critical question is whether it is more important to prevent harmful conspiracy theories than to prevent harmful conspiracies—if we cannot prevent both. Arguably, the prevention of successful conspiracies is of crucial importance, as conspiracies may cause massive eco-

[11] Conspirators must act voluntarily. A person who is *forced* to work in a secret group is not usually said to be involved in a conspiracy.

[12] When a group of people conspire, they do not usually have an *intention to conspire*, although some (or all) of the members of a conspiracy may realize that they have engaged in a conspiracy.

nomic, political and personal harm. Of course, it is important to interfere in conspiracy theories if they include libels or hate speech (as the Holocaust denial probably does) but, in general, the free discussion about possible plots should be allowed.[13] Seeking the truth is permissible, and people should be free to express their doubts, however implausible they appear to the rest of us. The prevalence of conspiracy theories helps to maintain openness in society (cf. Coady 2006: 170). Even if conspiracy theories do not prevent conspiracies, they may make potential conspirators think twice.[14] Also, conspiracy theorists may force others to improve their explanations of political events (cf. Clarke 2002: 148). Occasionally, conspiracy theorists and investigative journalists reveal and unmask genuine conspiracies, either by themselves or by pushing authorities to launch further investigations. Allowing free conspiracy theorizing has some moral costs—global warming conspiracy theory is certainly potentially harmful—but that is the price we have to pay.

Unsurprisingly, those who defend state action against conspiracy theorizing tend to claim that they are interested only in *false* conspiracy theories. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009: 206) write explicitly that they are interested only in "demonstrably false" (and harmful) conspiracy theories.[15] If we focus only on false theories, then we do not need the ordinary language meaning of the notion of conspiracy theories. However, to limit one's discussion to "false" theories is not an easy task. In order to make such limitation one should know which theories are really false—and not only *believed to be false*.[16] Until 2013, the claim that the National Security Agency (NSA) was monitoring millions of people all over the world was rather commonly *believed to be false* (among those who had heard about the claim), but it was not. The NSA surveillance conspiracy theory turned out to be true. The epistemic authority—in this case the mainstream media—that let us believe that monitoring cannot be that large was simply wrong. *If* we have strong and sufficient evidence that a particular conspiracy theory is obviously false and causes concrete, immediate and serious harm, then of course we have good grounds to defend state action against the dissemination of the theory. But these cases may be rare. Conspiracies are common, and most of us are familiar with the Pisonian conspiracy, Operation Valkyrie, MKultra conspiracy, Operation Northwoods, Volkswagen emission scandal, and so on.

Perhaps the state may have some role in conspiracy debates—the state authorities can try to ensure that the views of scientific communities get enough publicity, that people have sufficient skills to interpret the media, and so on—but generally speaking the idea that the state should actively intervene in public discussions seems quite problematic.

[13] Whether socially harmful and false conspiracy theories ought to be prohibited by the government is of course a large question. People who support free-speech-at-any-cost ideology would reject the idea that they should be prohibited. On the other, "historical denialism" is already prohibited in some countries, including France.

[14] However, if there are too many conspiracy theories around, then nobody is interested in checking them, and this can certainly help conspirators.

[15] Cf. David Coady's paper in this journal.

[16] The examples Sunstein and Vermeule use (JFK, 9/11) indicate that their discussion concerns theories that are quite commonly *believed* to be false. In that respect the examples resemble the Irangate conspiracy theory and the NSA conspiracy theory that were also rather commonly believed to be false.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that if we accept the ordinary language meaning of the notion of conspiracy theory, then the idea that the state should actively fight against those theories sounds mistaken. Conspiracy theories are sometimes true, and open public discussion about conspiracy theories should be allowed—with few exceptions. The idea that the state authorities should be active in debates concerning political conspiracy theories has been rather common in recent years. If we want to evaluate the demand that the state authorities should fight against claims that are usually called political conspiracy theories, then it is important to know *which* theories are usually called conspiracy theories. In ordinary language the notion of conspiracy theory usually means an explanation that refers to (actual or alleged) secret intentional action, in particular to a plot or a conspiracy. A conspiracy theory conflicts (or has conflicted) with the views supported by relevant epistemic authorities and would get (or had got) much media attention were it shown to be true (or when it has been proven true). An important feature of conspiracy theories is that they need not be false. Since conspiracy theories may turn out to be true, the idea of preventing their public and open analysis sounds dangerous—even if we accept the fact that some conspiracy theories can be potentially harmful. Those who defend state action against conspiracy theorizing tend to claim that they are interested only in *false* conspiracy theories. However, I argued that it is often rather difficult to tell which conspiracy theories are false, and not only believed to be false. History proves that some rather unpopular conspiracy theories have turned out to be true. Therefore, the idea that the state should actively intervene in public discussions seems problematic, although the authorities could certainly have some role, say, in educating people.

Probably the best way to react to conspiracy theories is an open democratic discussion in which each theory is evaluated on a case-by-case basis instead of rejecting and opposing them merely because they refer to an alleged conspiracy (cf. Dentith 2016). The destiny of each theory should be determined by judging whether the overall evidence supports the theory or not. Perhaps I am overly optimistic, but when a conspiracy theory is false and rubbish, the public debate should eventually show that it is false and rubbish.[17]

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