

“Conspiracy Theories”: The Public Trust Skepticism Factor

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“Conspiracy” is a real word for a real event that has existed in human societies in all cultures throughout human history. [Appendix A]

The assassination of the President of the United States on national television by a “lone” assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, who himself is assassinated the next day by another “lone” assassin—would cause even the most rational skeptic, or critical thinker, to question the institutional narrative of the events. [1]

In other words, the institutional narrative, or official explanation, of a lone assassin, who was in turn assassinated the very next day by another lone assassin, is as epistemically dubious, and as equally “silly and without merit,” as any of the conspiracy theories surrounding the JFK assassination.

The human species has evolved as pattern-seeking, cause-inferring animals. As such, our nature drives us to find meaningful relationships to understand the world. Conspiracy theories are offered as alternate explanation to an important social, political or economic event (henceforward, “The Event”) when the institutional narrative is confusing or unsatisfactory. Conspiracy, originally a neutral term, has acquired a somewhat derogatory meaning since the mid sixties, for it implies a paranoid tendency to see the influence of some malign covert agency in certain events. Conspiracy theorizing has become commonplace in the mass media and emerged as a cultural phenomenon in the United States following the public assassination of JFK.

Noam Chomsky, linguist and scholar, contrasts conspiracy theory as, more or less, the opposite of institutional analysis. The latter focuses mostly on explanations based on the information found in official records of publicly known institutions, whereas the former offers explanations based on information derived from coalitions of individuals.

Most academics, or the rational community, find the conspiracy theories of popular culture to be silly and without merit, and automatically dismiss such alternative explanations as ridiculous, misconceived, unfounded, outlandish and the result of irrational thinking by paranoid schizophrenics. Some academics even contend that conspiracy theories “undermine human social and civic decency in society.” [2]

However, on closer examination, academics can see, and are forced to admit, that there is no systemic flaw to the concept of the conspiracy theory per se, because 1) there have been at least *33 Conspiracy Theories That Turned Out To Be True* and 2) it is in the nature of many conspiracy theories that they cannot be falsified; that is, proven to be false.

In *Of Conspiracy Theories*, Brian Keeley acknowledges this important point but then argues that it's not the theory that is the problem, but rather the theorist. The theorists, we are told, display a "particular absence or deformities of critical thinking skills when they refuse to accept the institutional explanation of The Event." He further wonders whether the problem lies in our teaching methods. [3]

Keeley refers to the numerous historically verified conspiracy theories as Warranted Conspiracy Theories (WCTs), as opposed to theories that have not, or cannot, be verified and are thus, according to Keeley, Unwarranted Conspiracy Theories, (UCTs). When all the academic terminology, doublespeak and jargon are stripped away, a UCT is simply an alternative explanation of The Event that hasn't been verified by independent sources. [4]

Keeley admits that he and the academic community have no justification to systematically and unilaterally dismiss conspiracy theories as silly and without merit when he writes:

There is no criterion or set of criteria that provide a priori grounds for distinguishing WCTs from UCTs. One might perhaps like to insist here that UCTs ought to be false, and this is why we are not warranted in believing them, but it is in the nature of many conspiracy theories that they cannot be falsified. The best we may do is show why the warrant for believing them is so poor.

And the best he can show as to "why the warrant for believing them is so poor" is public trust skepticism.

It is this pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions entailed by some mature conspiracy theories which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted.

It is not their lack of falsifiability per se, but a belief in an increasingly massive conspiracy theory that undermines the grounds for believing in anything. Accepting the UCT explanation requires one to question too many of the various institutions that have been set up to generate reliable data and evidence in our world.

At some point, according to Keeley, we shall be forced to recognize the unwarranted nature of the conspiracy if we are to be left with any warranted explanations and beliefs at all.

And finally, as the theory grows to include more and more people and institutions and yet remains unverified, the less plausible the conspiracy becomes; because, it stands to reason that, at some point, someone would have come forward with the missing and necessary data.

Notice the words, "we shall be forced to recognize;" rather than, "we have proof" that the theory is false. Keeley admits that academics are entitled to dismiss a conspiracy theory if a belief in that alternative explanation undermines the grounds for believing in anything. Furthermore, we are entitled to dismiss a mature conspiracy if it involves too many people. Keeley's take on the JFK assassination mature conspiracy might read as follows:

Even if the CIA, FBI, Secret Service, Police Departments and Coroners offices in two cities, were part of a large conspiracy to cover up their incompetence in the public assassination of JFK, "it is impossible to believe that not a single

member of the any of the agencies involved would be moved by guilt, self interest, or some other motivation to reveal the agency's role in the tragedy, if not to the press, then to a lover or family member. Governmental agencies, even those as regulate and controlled as the military and intelligence agencies, are plagued with leaks and rumors. To propose that an explosive secret could be closeted for any length of time simply reveals a lack of understanding of the nature of modern bureaucracies. Like the world itself, they are made up of too many people with too many different agendas to be easily controlled."

Keeley asserts that, "we do live in an open world, but only because to think otherwise would lead to disastrous skepticism." For Keeley, the theorists lack critical thinking skills because they don't recognize that a belief in a UCT invalidates every other social belief they need to function in society.

In his attempt to prove the theorists are guilty of too much skepticism, Keeley overlooks the implications of the nature, logistics and institutional narrative of The Event. Everything that can be shown to be true about the mature conspiracy theory—unfalsifiability, skepticism, epistemically dubious—applies to the narrative of The Event.

A close look at the JFK assassination mature conspiracy will illustrate my point.

The JFK Assassination: A mature conspiracy theory case study

Is the institutional narrative of the Oswald lone assassin theory, any more epistemically dubious, or any less "silly and without merit," as the JFK tin-foil hat conspiracies?

The CIA killed JFK; the Mob killed JFK; the CIA and the Mob working together killed JFK; last but not least, Fidel Castro contracted with the KGB to have JFK killed.

Neither the institutional nor the conspiratorial explanation of the event is a warranted belief and should be dismissed on epistemic grounds. That is, there is sufficient reason to believe that the institutional view, just like the conspiratorial view, of the JFK assassination is false, yet neither view can be falsified.

A conspiratorial explanation of the nature and logistics of The Event is really no more or less rational and logical as the institutional narrative. Thus, Keeley should have written:

There is no criterion or set of criteria that provide a priori grounds for distinguishing warranted conspiracy theories (WCTs) from UCTs or the Institutional View.' One might perhaps like to insist here that warranted conspiracy theories, UCTs and the Institutional View ought to be false, and this is why we are not warranted in believing in any of them, but it is in the nature of many historical events that they cannot be falsified. The best we may do is show why the warrant for believing in either the conspiracy or the institutional explanation is so poor.

Errant Data and The conspiracy Theory Paradox

No discussion of conspiracy theories would be complete without a discussion of errant data. Anomalies and discrepancies surface immediately upon the announcement of The Event and increase as the conspiracy matures. Errant data, or data that cannot be reconciled with the

official explanation of the event, is the chief tool of the conspiracy theorist.

Again, the JFK Assassination illustrates my point. The rational community ignores the details of the rifle, the bullet and the witnesses who heard other shots from other directions (errant data) on the grounds that there is no reliable way to gather social data, as opposed to scientific, data about the human world. [5]

Furthermore, when pressed, people will be ready to admit that the anomalies and inconsistencies (errant data) in the institutional view could never be chance occurrences. They escape the obvious improbability question by correctly pointing out that the errant data, even if true, does not constitute proof of anything, especially that the event was a conspiracy.

Related to errant data is what we shall refer to as the Conspiracy Theory Paradox.

Why would the conspirators, with the ability to plan and manage a conspiracy involving the CIA, FBI, Secret Service, Police Departments and Coroners offices in two cities (e.g., the JFK assassination), come up with such a convoluted senseless plan riddled with so many mistakes, anomalies and discrepancies (errant data)? And then, inexplicably, that same errant data is ubiquitously exposed in the media for everyone to question. [6]

- Neither the rational nor the conspiracy community have an explanation for why the conspirators would come up with such a convoluted senseless plan when a much simpler plan would accomplish the same goal. Why not have a rogue agent, in the CIA, FBI or Secret Service shoot the president in the middle of the night?
- Neither the rational nor the conspiracy community have an explanation for why the conspirators would allow the mistakes, anomalies, discrepancies and the holes in the “official story” (errant data) to find it’s way into the official institutional record and then allow that same data to be aired on national television for all to question. [7]
- Neither the rational nor the conspiracy community have an explanation for how trivial it would have been for the conspirators to change or falsify the alleged discrepancy or anomaly and avoid the stupid “mistakes.” Consider how easy it would for the master criminals to just keep the Errant Data from being aired on national television compared to the magnitude of the criminal acts they are alleged to have committed.

Although the existence of a Paradox or Errant Data could never be offered as proof that the Event was a conspiracy, they are none the less consistent, though not proof, with a conspiracy to make you believe the event was a conspiracy. [8]

The Critical Thinking Trap

The Theorists, believing themselves to be truth seekers in assessing the nature, logistics and the institutional explanation of The Event classified as a UCT, are forced into a contradictory belief, or “critical thinking trap.”

Unwilling to abandon what they know to be the truth; that is, that the institutional view is

false, [9] theorists are forced into a degenerative research program. A degenerative research program is one where the auxiliary hypotheses and initial conditions are continually modified in light of new evidence in order to protect the original theory from apparent disconfirmation. [10]

Why doesn't everyone fall into the "critical thinking trap?"

The majority of people exposed to "The Event classified as a UCT," are apathetic, indifferent and feel powerless because of a belief that the power elite control the world. [11]

The rational community, or anyone who is not a theorists or indifferent, consciously or unconsciously realizes the institutional view cannot be true; but at the same time, again consciously or unconsciously, realize that any alternate explanation or theory would require they question the very foundations of their beliefs about the society they live in. [12]

In "Of Conspiracy Theories" Keeley begins with the premise that the theorists are the problem but ends with the admission that until a third option is presented, the theorists are really only guilty of hyper-skepticism (inherent in supposing dissimulation on a truly massive scale) because the theorists are unable to see that distrusting the claims of our institutions leads to "the absurdism of an irrational and essentially meaningless world." [13]

When the rational community resort to ad hominem attacks, i.e., conspiracy theories are "silly, without merit" or the result of irrational thinking by paranoid schizophrenics, they reveal how large a role trust—in both institutions and individuals, mechanisms and people—plays in their thinking and beliefs about UCTs.

What can we say about the institutional narrative, the Conspiracy Theory Paradox and the Errant Data? The Theorists are really only guilty of not recognizing the institutional narrative, the Conspiracy Theory Paradox and the Errant Data are consistent with, but not necessarily proof, of a *Conspiracy to make you believe the event was a Conspiracy*. [14]

Notes

[1] The assassination of the President of the United States on national television by a lone assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, who according to authorities used an obsolete bolt-action WWI rifle that was not capable of firing bullets fast enough to wound, let alone kill, John F. Kennedy, who himself is assassinated the next day by another lone assassin—would cause even the most rational skeptic, or critical thinker, to question the institutional narrative of the events.

Is there any justification for a belief that the Warren Commission properly investigated the assassination of JFK when they concluded Oswald acted alone when he used a heavily oiled cheap rifle with a distorted sight, hidden in a paper sack later discovered on the sixth floor without a trace of oil, to for his miraculous feat of marksmanship with extraordinary accuracy at a moving target in minimal time?

The Warren Commission when faced with the impossibility of the shooting came up with the single bullet theory:

The Warren Commission reported that a single bullet hit Kennedy in the back of the neck and exited from the throat just below the Adam's apple, and that same bullet entered Connally's back, exited from his chest, went completely through his right wrist, and lodged in his left thigh.

Or is there any justification for a belief the United States House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) properly investigated the assassination of JFK when they concluded in 1978 that “the original FBI investigation and the Warren Commission Report to be seriously flawed and that there were at least four shots fired and only three of which could be linked to Oswald. The report concluded that the “CIA, the Soviet Union, organized crime, and several other groups were not involved,” but “they could not rule out the involvement of individual members of those groups.”

[2] Stephen Jay Gould, the evolutionary Theorist at Harvard University considers conspiracy theorizing “garbage” and believes they must be “discredited [/debunked] in order for society to lead “a safe and sane life.” Gould believes we are vulnerable “thinking reeds,” as opposed to rational creatures, and that unless “we rigorously use human reason, we will lose out to frightening forces of irrationality, romanticism, uncompromising “true” belief which will result in the inevitability of mob action.

[3] An article, “[Of Conspiracy Theories](#),” written by Brian Keeley and published in the Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 96, No. 3. (Mar., 1999) attempts to explain why so many people refuse to accept the institutional view he wonders if “our approach to teaching thinking/reason skills” is the problem that cause so many members of society (The Irrational Thinkers) to believe in them.”

Keeley writes:

“It is incumbent upon philosophers to provide analysis of the errors involved with common delusions, if that is indeed what they are. If a kind of academic snobbishness underlies our previous refusal to get involved here, there may be another reason. Conspiracy theorising, in political philosophy at least, has been identified with irrationality of the worst sort—here the locus classicus may be some dismissive remarks made by Karl Popper in *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Popper 1996, Vol.2: 94-9). Pigden (1993) shows convincingly that Popper’s remarks cannot be taken to support a rational presumption against conspiracy theories in history and politics. (summary: Keeley rejects Popper, and this causes a change.)

[4] Unwarranted Conspiracy Theories (UCTs) and Warranted Conspiracy Theories (WCTs)

Characteristics of Unwarranted Conspiracy Theories (UCTs)

1. A UCT is an explanation that runs counter to some received, official, or “obvious” account’ (116-7). In many instances there exists the presence of a “cover story” that is perceived as the most damning piece of evidence for the given historical event under consideration.
2. UCTs typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events and because Conspiracy Theorists rarely if ever have a coherent beginning-to-end narrative of what they think happened, many of their theories wind up laying the blame on some other force; e.g., the Illuminati.
3. ‘The chief tool of the Conspiracy Theorist is errant data, or anomalies and discrepancies in information. Keeley defines errant data as data that cannot be reconciled with the official explanation of the event; or data, which true, would tend to contradict official explanations and support the cover story.

Characteristics of Unwarranted Conspiracy Theorists

1. The Fundamental Attribution Error. Conspiracy Theorists have a tendency to focus on

errant data and are prone to making what Keeley refers to as the “fundamental attribution error.” The “fundamental attribution error” is the idea that all UCTs can be reduced to a supposed discrepancy or anomaly in one official record or another.

2. The Degenerative Research Program. Conspiracy Theorists exhibit irrational behavior when their theories take on the appearance of forming the core of a degenerative research program.
3. Dispositional versus Situational. Conspiracy Theorists severely overestimate the importance of dispositional factors while underestimating the importance of situational factors when attempting to explain the Conspiracy event.

[5] Errant Data, [anomalies and inconsistencies] which are unaccounted for by official [Institutional] explanations, which if true, would tend to contradict official explanations, cannot be relied upon, because while it is appropriate to place great stress on explaining errant data in the natural sciences, it is inappropriate in the social sciences. [citation]

Errant data is only errant in relation to an accepted theory, and to discount errant data on grounds that apply to both errant and non-errant data would be to prejudice oneself in favor of data simply because it happens to be explained by the received theory.

[6] At bottom what we face here is what we might term Goodenough’s Paradox of Conspiracies: the larger or more powerful an alleged conspiracy, the less need they have for conspiring. A sufficiently large collection of members of the American political, intelligence and military establishment—the kind of conspiracy being alleged by Oliver Stone et al.—wouldn’t need to engage in such nefarious activity since they would have the kind of organisation, influence, access to information, etc. that could enable them to achieve their goal efficiently and legally.

Note the existence of the paradox while it favors the Rational community is not proof the institutional view is correct. The fact that Theorists have no rational explanation of why the conspirators would make so many stupid mistakes reminds me of one of the central arguments of why nature does not imply design. Evolutionists dismiss the design (Intelligent Design) argument for nature because they question the design of the human eye.

[7] ‘The chief tool of the Conspiracy Theorist is errant data, or anomalies and discrepancies in information. Keeley defines errant data as data that cannot be reconciled with the official explanation of the event; or data, which true, would tend to contradict official explanations and support the cover story.

For example the JFK Assassination.

The rational community will knowingly ignore the details of the rifle, the bullet and the witnesses who heard other shots from other directions [errant data] and point out that while a Conspiracy Theory has epistemic value and does provide a unifying explanation of the event and the errant data, there is no reliable way to gather social data, as opposed to scientific, data about the human world.

- Errant Data, [anomalies and inconsistencies] which are unaccounted for by official [Institutional] explanations, which if true, would tend to contradict official explanations, cannot be relied upon, because while it is appropriate to place great stress on explaining errant data in the natural sciences, it is inappropriate in the social sciences. [citation]

Errant data is only errant in relation to an accepted theory, and to discount errant data on grounds that apply to both errant and non-errant data would be to prejudice oneself in favor of data simply because it happens to be explained by the received theory.

Furthermore, they will admit that the anomalies and inconsistencies [errant data] in the Institutional view could never be chance occurrences but at the same time they correctly point out the errant data does not constitute proof of anything, especially that the event was a conspiracy.

[8] [Is there any doubt that “there is a conspiracy to make you believe in a conspiracy”?](#)

[The JFK Conspiracy Theory Paradox](#)

[9] In 1978 the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in a preliminary report that Kennedy was “probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy” that may have involved multiple shooters and organized crime.

[10] A progressive research program is where “novel predictions and retrodictions are verified.

What I have demonstrated is that there is no justification for a belief in either the Institutional view or the Conspiratorial View of a UCT. *Critical thinking skills on the part of the Theorists force them into a degenerative research program. Critical thinking skills on the part of the Rational Community are used to avoid a degenerative research program.*

[11] Conspiracy and the Social Sciences

“There Are No Conspiracies” by G. William Domhoff in 2005 looks at Conspiracy Theories and the Power Elite from a social science perspective. [as opposed to the philosophical] G. William Domhoff, a Research Professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz first coined the non-conspiracy acronym TPTB. He received his Ph.D. at the University of Miami and has been teaching at the University of California, Santa Cruz, since 1965. Four of his books are among the top 50 best sellers in sociology on the Power Elite Theory for the years 1950 to 1995: Who Rules America? (1967); The Higher Circles (1970); Who Rules America Now? (1983); and the non-“conspiracy” critique and theory of the U.S. power structure, The Powers That Be (TPTB) in 1979.

The Power Elite theory, despite a superficial resemblance to some right-wing conspiracy theories, has key differences from them. The latter take, as the primary motive force of history, that “America is ruled from behind the scenes by a select conspiratorial group with secret desires united around some esoteric or gratuitously evil ideology.

And while the concentration of political and economic power [in the control of small, interlocking elites], is indeed likely to result in sporadic conspiracies; such a conspiracy is not necessary to the working of the system—it 1) simply occurs as a secondary phenomenon, and 2) occasionally speeds up or intensifies processes that happen for the most part automatically.

[12] The confidence in authorities would be so eroded that they are no longer warranted in holding any beliefs that are socially produced and puts one in the position of no longer being able to trust any of the institutions that we rely on in to function in the world. (Keeley 1999, 121). Such epistemic endpoints appear to embody a degree of skepticism that is too high to be acceptable by anyone.”
Brian Keeley

[13] The rejection of conspiracy thinking is not simply based on the belief that conspiracy theories are false as a matter of fact. The source of the problem goes much deeper. The world as we

understand it today is made up of an extremely large number of interacting agents, each with it's own imperfect view of the world and it's own set of goals. Such a system cannot be controlled because there are simply too many agents to be handled by any small controlling group. There are too many independent degrees of freedom. This is true of the economy, of the political electorate, and of the social, fact-gathering institutions upon which conspiracy theorists cast doubt."

[14] The Transparent Conspiracy is a collection of essays by Michael Morrissey. Morrissey, who holds a Ph.D. in linguistics from Cornell University, expands on the idea that the leaders (conspirators) "failed on purpose" and coined the phrase the "Mass Psychology of Partial Disclosure." Morrissey makes a compelling argument that there exists a conspiracy that involves the controlled media disclosing a limited amount of information concerning the government's culpability in atrocities such as the JFK, MLK and RFK assassinations. Morrissey believes a shadow government orchestrates a well-managed conspiracy/cover-up in order to intimidate, demoralize and alienate the tuned-in segment of the population that fully comprehends the corrupt nature of our government institutions.

The government's purpose, according to Morrissey, is keep the masses in a state of helplessness so they will be unable to upset the not-so-secret plans for what is referred to as for a New World Order. While his arguments are persuasive revisionist History contradicts any justification that the masses need to be kept in a state of helplessness. All of the Revolutions have shown to be the product of the elite and not the popular uprisings we were let to believe in our filtered history books.

Appendix A

A Short Course in "Conspiracy Science."

"Conspiracy" is a REAL word for a REAL act that has existed in human societies in all cultures throughout human history. If conspiracies did not exist, we would not have a word for it. The problem that we face today is that the US Government has arrogated to itself a singular role as a political pontificate that believes that it and its agents in the Justice Department, alone, constitute the only "person" (corporate person) on this Earth who is allowed to use the word "conspiracy" as it employs the charge of "conspiracy" every week in trials to put both guilty and innocent people in jail while deriding and discrediting all others who employ the word as "conspiracy theorists."

World-renowned author, investigator and philosopher, Paris Flammonde, has also completed a major work, "The Assassination of America," a rebuttal to the lies and disinformation of the Warren Commission Report and the House Select Committee Investigation on Political Assassinations conducted during the Carter Administration

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