Conspiracy Theories

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Preface

Back in 2015, in an article for the digital magazine *Aeon*, I discussed the intellectual character of conspiracy theorists. I was influenced by Susan Stebbing's famous observation that there is an urgent need today for the citizens of a democracy to think well. My idea in the *Aeon* article was that conspiracy theories were often the result of bad thinking and of the intellectual character traits that result in bad thinking.

Since the publication of my *Aeon* article, my take on conspiracy theories has changed. I have come around to the view that they need to be understood first and foremost in political terms, and that the intellectual character of conspiracy theorists is a side issue. For example, even if there is something wrong with the thinking behind conspiracy theories about the Holocaust, that is hardly the main issue with such theories and the people who promote them. The fundamental issues here are political and, indeed, ethical.

This book is about the politics of conspiracy theories. My claim is that they are basically a form of political propaganda and that the response to them also needs to be political. Although I'm a philosopher, it seems to me that many philosophers who write about conspiracy theories miss their real point. I have tried to put that right here.

I know from previous experience that criticising conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists is a tricky business. The reaction to my *Aeon* article was explosive and I don't suppose that what I say in this book will be any more palatable to conspiracy theorists and their apologists. I hope I am better prepared this time. To write about

conspiracy theories you need a thick skin, unless you are actually promoting a conspiracy theory.

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Why Are Conspiracy Theories So Popular?

Just how popular *are* Conspiracy Theories? It's sometimes suggested that we are living in a 'golden age' of Conspiracy Theories, but it's actually not clear that Conspiracy Theories are a hotter topic today than in the past. In their book *American Conspiracy Theories*, political scientists Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent describe the results of a fascinating study of conspiracy talk in letters sent to the *New York Times* between 1890 and 2010.[1] Perhaps surprisingly, they found that discussion of conspiracy theories has *diminished* in the United States since 1890. At least as far as America is concerned, we don't live in an age of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy talk comes in several varieties. On the one hand, there is the conspiracy talk of people who invent Conspiracy Theories, usually in order to circulate them more widely and to get other people to buy into them. You might think of individuals who come up with Conspiracy Theories as Conspiracy Theory *producers*. On the other hand, if all you do is consume other people's theories, then you are a Conspiracy Theory *consumer* rather than a producer. There are many different ways of 'consuming' a theory – any theory. For example, you can consume it by discussing it with friends, by posting something about it on Facebook or by retweeting it. All it takes to consume a Conspiracy Theory is to engage with it actively, one way or another.

Given the distinction between producing and consuming, the obvious next question is: why do producers produce

Conspiracy Theories and why do consumers consume them? You might think that this obvious question has an equally obvious answer: producers produce and promote Conspiracy Theories because they believe their theories to be *true*. And the same goes for consumers of Conspiracy Theories: the theories they consume are ones that they *believe in*.

It doesn't take long to work out that this can't be right; there are plenty of reasons for producing or consuming Conspiracy Theories that have little or nothing to do with belief in their truth. For a start, it's worth bearing in mind that Conspiracy Theories are big business and it wouldn't be too surprising if that has something to do with the willingness of some individuals to produce and promote such theories. These individuals aren't just Conspiracy Theory producers. They are also what Cass Sunstein calls *conspiracy entrepreneurs*, that is, conspiracy theorists who profit from promoting their theories.[2]

A good illustration of the business potential of Conspiracy Theories is the virtual store on Conspiracy Theorist Alex Jones's website Infowars. The range of products for sale includes not only survival gear and other conspiracy-related products but also dietary supplements, 'male vitality' pills and toothpaste. The Conspiracy Theories for which Jones is famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) are a marketing opportunity as well as a political statement.

The point is not that Conspiracy Theory producers don't believe their own theories, though some of these are so outlandish that one has to wonder whether they are serious. Does Alex Jones mean what he says about Sandy Hook being a false flag? Probably. Is David Icke serious about the planet's being ruled by shape-shifting reptilians?

Who can say? But one thing is clear: there's good money to be made by peddling such theories.

If this seems a little unfair on Conspiracy Theorists, perhaps it's worth pointing out that one of their favourite questions is *Cui bono?* – that is, 'Who benefits?'. For example, the theory that 9/11 was an inside job appeals to them partly because they think that the Bush administration benefited from the attacks. But if it's fair to ask who benefits from events such as 9/11, then it's also fair to ask who benefits from Conspiracy Theories about such events. And the answer in many cases appears to be: the very people who produce and promote these theories.

The benefits that Conspiracy Theories bring to their producers aren't just financial. If, as I've suggested, Conspiracy Theories can be an effective way of promoting a political ideology or of achieving a political objective, then that's another potential benefit. Belief in the literal truth of Conspiracy Theories needn't come into it if they are a form of political propaganda. You don't have to believe that Sandy Hook was a false flag in order to spread the story that it was, as a way of combating calls for greater gun control in the wake of the shooting. In much the same way, anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theorists have frequently invented and circulated anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theories that they knew to be false. It's enough to think of whoever came up with the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

It's even more obvious that consumers of Conspiracy Theories don't have to believe them. There are plenty of ways of actively engaging with a Conspiracy Theory you don't endorse. One way is, of course, to argue against it, and people engaging in 'conspiracy talk' include both opponents and proponents of Conspiracy Theories. Some people talk about Conspiracy Theories because they find them intriguing or entertaining. Posting details of a

Conspiracy Theory on Facebook is a way of engaging with it, but it's not unusual – to put it mildly – for people to post things on social media that they don't necessarily think are true. The extent to which people are agnostic about Conspiracy Theories is just as striking as the extent to which these theories are actively supported or opposed.

Still, there's no denying that significant numbers of people – producers and consumers – *do* believe, or say they believe, at least one prominent Conspiracy Theory. A study five years after 9/11 found that more than a third of Americans believed that the government had either assisted in the attacks or knew about them in advance and did nothing to stop them. A more recent study found that 63 per cent of registered voters in the United States buy into at least one conspiracy theory (or, in my terminology, one Conspiracy Theory). And, of course, it isn't just Americans who are into Conspiracy Theories. These are also prevalent in other parts of the world, and it's often said that the Middle East is a particular hotspot for belief in Conspiracy Theories.

From a psychological perspective, the number of people who seemingly endorse one or more Conspiracy Theories calls for a psychological explanation. Hence the birth of a new field of study: the psychology of Conspiracy Theories. Needless to say, Conspiracy Theorists haven't been keen on being studied by psychologists and it's not difficult to understand their lack of enthusiasm. Their position is, of course, that their theories are based on evidence and that no psychological explanation is called for. If a person has good evidence that 9/11 was an inside job, then that is usually enough to explain why that person believes that 9/11 was an inside job. What has psychology got to do with it?

What Conspiracy Theorists who argue like this are picking up on is a strange feature of many discussions of Conspiracy Theories from a psychological viewpoint. These discussions often start by saying that they take no position as to the actual truth or falsity of Conspiracy Theories. The psychologist's concern, they insist, is not whether these theories are true or false but why people believe them.

To see how odd this is, imagine a psychology of bananas. Specialists in this imaginary field say that they take no position on the actual existence of bananas. Their concern is not whether the widespread belief in the existence of bananas is true or false but only why people have this belief. However, the obvious explanation of a belief in the existence of bananas isn't neutral as to their existence. The obvious explanation is that people believe that bananas exist because bananas *do* exist and most of us know perfectly well that they do. The implication of asking why people believe X is that there is something *wrong* with believing X. This implication doesn't hold in a case where X stands for *bananas*, and that's why the whole idea of a psychology of bananas is so weird.

Conspiracy Theories aren't (literally) bananas, but asking why people believe them implies that those people are at fault for believing them. It implies, for example, that there is no legitimate reason to believe Conspiracy Theories. This is the implication that Conspiracy Theorists object to, and that many psychologists try to avoid. But there is no avoiding it. There is no neutral standpoint from which it makes sense to ask why people believe Conspiracy Theories. Either there is nothing wrong with believing them, in which case the question doesn't arise, or the question does arise, in which case there is something wrong with believing them.

Given that Conspiracy Theories are unlikely to be true and a good number of them have been conclusively refuted, it's reasonable to ask why people still believe them. Whether this reasonable question is one to which psychology gives a reasonable answer remains to be seen. It would be rash to deny that psychology has anything useful to say about this, but psychological accounts of belief in Conspiracy Theories are incomplete in one crucial respect: they don't pay nearly enough attention to the role of politics.

If you read what psychologists have to say about belief in Conspiracy Theories, you'll probably come away with two insights. One is that Conspiracy Theories have something to do with the way our brains work. As Rob Brotherton puts it, these theories result from 'some of our brain's quirks and foibles', including some of our brain's inbuilt biases and shortcuts.[3]

The other insight from psychology is that belief in Conspiracy Theories is at least partly a question of personality: there are measurable individual differences in how willing people are to accept such theories. People who have a propensity to believe them are described as having a 'conspiracy mentality' or as being 'conspiracy-minded'. Psychologists have even devised a Conspiracy Mentality Scale (in psychology there's always a scale). On this view, being conspiracy-minded is a personality trait, and knowing that a person is highly conspiracy-minded enables one to predict his response to a Conspiracy Theory he hasn't come across before. The more conspiracy-minded he is, the more likely he is to believe a new Conspiracy Theory.

When psychologists talk about our brain's 'quirks and foibles', they're usually talking about a range of so-called cognitive biases. Here are three of them:

- intentionality bias – the tendency to assume that things happen because they were intended rather than accidental;
- confirmation bias – the tendency to look only for evidence that supports what one already believes while ignoring contrary evidence;
- proportionality bias – the tendency to assume that the scale of an event's cause must match the scale of the event itself.

Of course, some things *do* happen because somebody intended them to happen and big effects *do* sometimes have big causes. But assuming that this is always the case will sometimes lead one astray.

It's easy to see how biases related to intentionality and proportionality might play a part in generating some Conspiracy Theories, while confirmation bias helps to sustain preexisting theories. Take the disappearance of flight MH-370. When Malaysia Airlines flight 370 disappeared without trace in March 2014, many explanations were put forward. Was it an accident? Quite possibly, but Conspiracy Theorists have other ideas: the pilot and the co-pilot deliberately crashed the plane, it was brought down by a missile, it was hijacked, it was the victim of a cyberattack, and so on. Take your pick, but what all these explanations have in common is the assumption that MH-370 vanished because somebody intended it. That's intentionality bias in action.

Proportionality bias has been blamed for Conspiracy Theories about the assassination of JFK. If big effects must have correspondingly big causes, then it's not surprising that Conspiracy Theorists have a hard time accepting that somebody as insignificant as Oswald could have been responsible for the death of a president. So either he

wasn’t as insignificant as he seems or other people were involved. And, once proportionality bias has generated a Conspiracy Theory about the assassination, confirmation bias keeps the theory going. The search for decisive evidence of a conspiracy is ongoing, while the decisive evidence that Oswald killed Kennedy without help from anyone else is downplayed or ignored.

Attractive as cognitive bias explanations of Conspiracy Theories might appear, there is an obvious problem with them: cognitive biases are universal – they affect all of us – but belief in Conspiracy Theories is not. How is it, then, that many people seemingly *aren’t* Conspiracy Theorists? Do their brains work differently from the brains of Conspiracy Theorists? That’s not an inference that psychologists have been prepared to draw. What they argue instead is that, to quote Brotherton again, ‘we are all natural-born conspiracy theorists’.[4]

It’s undeniable that we all believe some conspiracy theories with a small ‘c’ and a small ‘t’, that is, some accounts of conspiracies. But that’s not the issue. The issue is whether we are all prone to believing Conspiracy Theories with a capital ‘C’ and a capital ‘T’. That’s unlikely. I have no urge to believe that 9/11 was an inside job, that Sandy Hook was a false flag or that Oswald didn’t act alone in assassinating JFK. I’m not a Conspiracy Theorist and I don’t think I’m unique in this regard. We aren’t all Conspiracy Theorists, let alone natural-born Conspiracy Theorists.

It would be nice but probably unrealistic to think that non-Conspiracy Theorists are somehow immune to cognitive biases or in general less susceptible to them than Conspiracy Theorists. Of course, belief in Conspiracy Theories – like belief in anything else – has something to do with the way our brains work, but the quirks and foibles of the human brain don’t look like a good bet when it comes

to explaining beliefs that only a minority of human beings – albeit a significant minority – have.

What about the idea of conspiracy mindedness as a personality trait? This looks much more promising, since there is no suggestion that everybody has this trait. Psychologists point to evidence that people who believe one conspiracy theory (one Conspiracy Theory as I would put it) are more likely to believe other such theories, even totally unrelated ones. Isn't that proof that belief in Conspiracy Theories has more to do with the believer's personality than with the rational assessment of the evidence?

In one of the most influential academic discussions of conspiracy theories, Ted Goertzel argued that conspiratorial beliefs typically make up what he dubbed a *monological* belief system.[5] In a monological belief system, each belief supports every other belief, and the more conspiracies a monological thinker believes in the more likely he or she is to believe in any new conspiracy theory, regardless of its subject matter. For example, if you believe that 9/11 was an inside job, then you are more likely to believe a Conspiracy Theory about Princess Diana's death in a car crash. Yet there is no obvious connection between these theories.

Goertzel's idea was put to the test in a study by Michael Wood, Karen Douglas and Robbie Sutton.[6] They found that people who subscribe to a bunch of conspiracy theories are not only more likely to subscribe to other, *unrelated* conspiracy theories, they are also prepared to sign up to *contradictory* theories. People who believe that Princess Diana faked her own death (and hence is still alive) are significantly more likely to believe that she was murdered (and hence is dead) by enemies of her boyfriend's father, Mohammed Al-Fayed. The more the participants in the study believed that Osama bin Laden was already dead

when American Special Forces raided his compound in Abbottabad, the more they believed that he is still alive.

Psychological studies like this should always come with a health warning. Their guinea pigs are almost always undergraduates studying psychology, and so are hardly representative of the general population. There are also concerns about whether their findings can be reproduced in matching studies. Still, taking the psychological evidence at face value, it's hard not to draw the conclusion that there is such a thing as being conspiracy-minded or having a conspiracy *mindset* that predisposes you to believe conspiracy theories.

What psychological studies *don't* prove is that being conspiracy-minded is a personality trait. A different interpretation of the evidence is that the conspiracy mindset is an *ideology* rather than a personality trait. An ideology is a set of fundamental ideas and beliefs that shape one's understanding of political reality. For example, Marxism is an ideology in this sense, and so is what is sometimes referred to as 'conspiracism'. Fundamental to conspiracism is the belief that people in authority are hiding things from the rest of us as part of a conspiracy to achieve their own sinister goals. If this is what you believe, then it's understandable if you end up endorsing even contradictory theories, as long as they are all in keeping with your overall conspiracist ideology.

What's the difference between an ideology and a personality trait? Personality traits as generally understood by psychologists aren't ideas or beliefs, whatever else they are. For example, one of the so-called Big Five personality traits is *agreeableness*, but being agreeable isn't a matter of believing anything in particular. In contrast, being conspiracy-minded *is* a matter of believing something in particular: it's a matter of believing that people in authority

are hiding things from the rest of us. In addition, personality traits have a genetic basis, but it's debatable whether ideologies like conspiracism are genetic. For these reasons it's safer to think of conspiracy mindedness as an ideology than as a personality trait.

The ideological interpretation of conspiracy mindedness explains another well-known result of psychological research. Viren Swami and his colleagues made up a conspiracy theory about the drink Red Bull and tried the theory out on 169 women and 112 men from Austria, where the brand is well known. Elements of the theory included the claim that Red Bull contains substances that raise desire for the product and that the advertising slogan 'Red Bull gives you wings' was chosen because, in testing, rats who were given the drink literally grew wings.[7]

The Red Bull study showed that the strongest predictor of belief in the fictitious conspiracy theory was belief in other real-world conspiracy theories. Again, this is just what one would expect if being conspiracy-minded is an ideology. A conspiracist has a general disposition to believe conspiracy theories, and this disposition can be strong enough to get him to believe entirely fictitious as well as contradictory Conspiracy Theories. His commitment to a conspiracist ideology trumps all other considerations and shapes his response to individual Conspiracy Theories.

Is that it, then? Do we now have an answer to the question of why people believe Conspiracy Theories? Can we say that people believe Conspiracy Theories because they are conspiracy-minded, that is, committed to the ideology of conspiracism? We could say this, but only if we're prepared to answer a further question. Why are some people conspiracy-minded? Why are they committed to the ideology of conspiracism? Without an answer to this, all we get from psychology is the not very exciting insight that

people believe Conspiracy Theories because, as a matter of ideology or personality, they are predisposed to believe Conspiracy Theories. A more complete explanation also needs to say *why* it is that some people have this predisposition.

Here's one possibility: the ideology of conspiracism is attractive to some because it fits their *broader* ideological or political commitments. Some political outlooks are more conducive to conspiracism than others. Among the political outlooks that are conducive to conspiracism, there are variations in the particular types of Conspiracy Theory they support. In the American context, for example, Uscinski and Parent suggest that liberals tend to be Truthers (i.e. to believe that President Bush was directly or indirectly responsible for the 9/11 attacks), whereas conservatives tend to be Birthers (i.e. to believe that President Obama wasn't born in America).

Tying conspiracism to ideology in this way is a good way of building on the notion that Conspiracy Theories are forms of political propaganda. For propaganda to be effective, people need to believe it and the propaganda model needs to explain why Conspiracy Theories are believed by some of their consumers. It's not just a matter of these consumers having a general tendency to believe Conspiracy Theories. They're also inclined to accept *particular* Conspiracy Theories or particular *types* of Conspiracy Theory. Which ones? Ones that are in line with their political outlook. For example, people with free market ideologies are more likely to accept climate change Conspiracy Theories. Why would that be? Presumably because, as committed free marketeers, they don't like the regulations that would be needed to combat climate change if climate change is real.

What is true of Conspiracy Theory consumers is also true of Conspiracy Theory producers. The Conspiracy Theories

they devise and promote are those that match their particular political or ideological commitments. To this extent ideology is both the cause and the effect of many Conspiracy Theories. On the one hand, it is a major part of what makes them attractive to some people in the first place. On the other hand, the political ideologies that make them attractive are also the political ideologies that it is their function to promote.

The ideologies that are most conducive to Conspiracy Theories are extremist ideologies. In a study for the British think tank Demos, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller show that Conspiracy Theories are prevalent across the extremist spectrum.[8] Far-right ideologies often incorporate anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theories, and it should come as no surprise if right-wing extremists are vociferous Conspiracy Theorists. Left-wing Conspiracy Theorists focus on global elites and on international financiers. Since such groups are assumed by many on the left to be Jewish, left-wing Conspiracy Theories can be as anti-Semitic as right-wing Conspiracy Theories.

Another extremist political ideology with links to conspiracism is Islamism. According to Al Qaeda, for example, there is a Judeo-Christian conspiracy to destroy Islam. Osama bin Laden made many statements to this effect and it's more straightforward to see his conspiracism as a reflection of his Islamist ideology than as a personality trait. Islamist Conspiracy Theories are generally anti-Semitic. The official manifesto of Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement in Gaza, even quotes the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as if they were genuine.

One worry about the hypothesis that the ideology of conspiracism has its roots in extremist ideologies such as fascism, communism or Islamism is that there are extremists who are not Conspiracy Theorists. If not

everyone on the extreme left or extreme right is a Conspiracy Theorist, then how can the conspiracism of *anyone* on the extreme left or extreme right be adequately explained by his extremism? In the same way, Uscinski and Parent note that not all American liberals are Truthers and not all conservatives are Birthers. So, when confronted by a Birther who also happens to be a conservative, how can it possibly be right to explain his conspiracism by reference to his conservatism? Is there really a causal connection between conspiracism and politics in a more general sense?

Think of an analogy. Smoking, we are told, causes lung cancer. Yet lots of people who smoke don't get lung cancer. In fact, medical research suggests only around 17 per cent of current male smokers will get lung cancer.[9] So in what sense does smoking cause lung cancer? If not *everyone* who smokes gets lung cancer, how can *any* smoker's lung cancer be adequately explained by the fact that he smoked? The answer is, because smoking significantly increases a person's chances of getting lung cancer. Maybe only 17 per cent of male smokers will eventually get lung cancer, but among non-smokers the figure is only just over 1 per cent. To say that smoking 'causes' lung cancer is to say that it is a major risk factor for lung cancer. If you want to reduce levels of lung cancer, it's a good idea to reduce levels of smoking. It's irrelevant that lots of smokers don't get lung cancer.

In much the same way, being committed to an extremist ideology is a significant risk factor for conspiracism. Even if not all fascists, communists or Islamists are conspiracy-minded, being committed to one of these ideologies significantly raises the probability that one will be a conspiracist. Why should that be? Because conspiracism is integral to these ideologies. This is clearest in the case of extreme right-wing or fascist ideologies such as the one

espoused by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. For these ideologies, conspiracism isn't an optional extra. It's part and parcel of their core vision, so one would expect people who buy into the core vision to buy into conspiracism.

Rather than worrying about the fact that not all extremists are conspiracists, one might worry instead about the fact that not all conspiracists are extremists. Just as there are non-smokers who get lung cancer, there are people whose politics is middle-of-the-road but who are still conspiracists. In their case, conspiracism looks like a more free-standing political ideology, one that isn't obviously related to their other political commitments. How come they are still conspiracists? What other factors are at play?

It's helpful to think about this because, even in the case of people who *are* extremists of one sort or another, it would be naïve to suppose that their conspiracism is *wholly* explained by their other ideological or political commitments. Human beings aren't that simple, and one would expect a satisfactory explanation of a person's conspiracism to be complex rather than simple, multidimensional rather than one-dimensional. The challenge is to identify a *range* of factors that can lead to conspiracism, even among political moderates.

One important factor is the extent to which one is a member of a community that has been the victim of actual rather than imaginary conspiracies. For example, one finding of research into belief in Conspiracy Theories in the US context is that African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to be conspiracy-minded than white people. Popular conspiratorial beliefs among African Americans include the belief that AIDS was created to kill black people and that the federal government selectively flooded black neighbourhoods during Hurricane Katrina by blowing up the levees.

Even if these Conspiracy Theories are unlikely to be true, the actions they describe aren't any more horrifying than things that have actually been done to African Americans by successive governments. For example, in the aftermath of the Great Depression, the US Public Health Service decided to do a study of untreated syphilis among African American men. In what came to be known as the Tuskegee Experiment, around 600 impoverished sharecroppers were recruited and observed over several decades. Even when an effective treatment for syphilis was discovered, the study wasn't discontinued and the men weren't treated. The research only came to an end in 1972, when a whistle-blower leaked the story to the press. In 1997, President Bill Clinton apologised to victims of the experiment on behalf of the United States.

It's only to be expected that minority communities that have been victims of racist conspiracies like the Tuskegee Experiment are more conspiracy-minded than communities that haven't. They have good reason to be suspicious of government. It's a case of once bitten twice shy, and theories that might otherwise seem outlandish don't look all that implausible when viewed from the perspective of victim communities. If government agencies are capable of pulling a stunt like Tuskegee, why wouldn't they be capable of setting out to infect African Americans with AIDS?

One answer to this question is that the bad things that a government is capable of doing aren't necessarily things that it has actually done. There isn't good evidence in support of the AIDS Conspiracy Theory, and new regulations and safeguards that came into force after Tuskegee would make it difficult for government agencies to do anything similar again even if they wanted to. Still, the fact remains that the conspiracism of many African Americans has nothing to do with their personality *or* their

political ideology. It's just an understandable reaction to how they have been treated.

The point is a general one. The more you learn about *proven* conspiracies in your part of the world, the more you will be inclined to believe *unproven* Conspiracy Theories. You might be receptive to Conspiracy Theories because of your other ideological commitments, but it's also possible that they have absolutely nothing to do with it. You don't have to be an extremist to be a Conspiracy Theorist, because you don't have to be an extremist to be a victim of a real conspiracy.

Nor do you have to be an extremist to be politically marginalised. That's worth pointing out, because political marginalisation is another factor that has been identified as making people more conspiracy-minded. One study tested the hypothesis that conspiracy interpretations of the world flourish in the context of marginalisation, poverty, and other negative life circumstances.[10] The results are striking. People who are conspiracy-minded are more likely to see themselves as being at the bottom of the social ladder, to have thought seriously about committing suicide, to have trouble sleeping, and to feel less able to rely on family or friends in the event of a crisis. The authors of the study are careful to point out that, just because there is a correlation between conspiracy mindedness and marginalisation, it doesn't follow that the two are causally connected. Even if they are connected, is it marginalisation that causes conspiracy mindedness or conspiracy mindedness that causes marginalisation?

Even without definitive answers to these questions, it's interesting that conspiracy mindedness is correlated with negative events. This opens up the possibility that a person's conspiracy mindedness has more to do with that person's life circumstances than with his political ideology.

Notice also that these circumstances might include being brought up by conspiracists. Just as one can be a Marxist or a Catholic because one was raised to be one, a person can be a conspiracist because that's how he was raised.

However many objective risk factors for conspiracy mindedness are identified, there is always the possibility that someone who is at risk on all counts doesn't end up as a conspiracist. In the same way, there are conspiracists who display none of the risk factors. What if a person who is well off, white, middle class, and politically moderate still ends up being conspiracy-minded? What explains *his* conspiracism? This question might be difficult to answer, but explaining what makes a person conspiracy-minded isn't just a matter of trying to figure out what pushed him to be like that. There are also pull factors to be taken into account. For all the talk about ideology and negative life events, there's also the fact that Conspiracy Theories are actually *seductive*. If they weren't, they would be totally ineffective as propaganda, so it's worth thinking about their seductiveness. What is it about Conspiracy Theories that hooks people?

One factor is that Conspiracy Theories are *stories*. A good Conspiracy Theory can be just as intriguing and captivating as a good detective novel. The fundamental premise is that the way things really are in the world is quite different from how they seem. White is black and black is white. The Conspiracy Theory consumer is set the challenge of figuring out whodunnit, if not the perpetrators identified by official stories. Who really killed Kennedy, if not Oswald? Who really did 9/11, if not Al Qaeda? When Conspiracy Theories unveil the truth about such events, they have the feel of an Agatha Christie novel identifying the real killer on the last page on the basis of clues that were there all along, if only one had been paying attention.

The analogy with fiction doesn't end there. Conspiracy Theories are morality tales with all-knowing and all-powerful villains and naïve victims who have no idea what is really going on until the truth is revealed by the Conspiracy Theorist. As Rob Brotherton notes, 'the best conspiracy theories have all the trappings of a classic underdog story'.[11] More often than not, the underdog is none other than the brave Conspiracy Theorist, who doggedly takes on the forces of the deep state or the new world order in the interests of making sure that the public knows what's really going on beneath the surface.

Another attraction of Conspiracy Theories is that they invest random events with a deeper significance, which they wouldn't otherwise have. To Princess Diana's many fans, her death in a car accident was so hard to stomach partly because it was so meaningless. How much more comforting to think that it wasn't an accident, that she was the victim of a malicious plot by secret forces! If this is the real story, then she can be regarded as a kind of martyr, just as some Conspiracy Theorists insist on seeing President Kennedy as a martyr.

In a book on religious belief, philosopher Tim Crane argues that the religious impulse can be expressed by the thought that *this can't be all there is; there must be something more to the world*.[12] A similar quasi-religious impulse underpins Conspiracy Theories and accounts for their attractiveness to some people. The impulse in relation to events like the apparently random death of Princess Diana or the killing of President Kennedy by Lee Harvey Oswald is to think that *this can't be all there is to it; there must be something more to these events*.

The idea that Conspiracy Theories give expression to a religious impulse is related to a point I made in chapter 1. In my discussion of the sense in which Conspiracy Theories

embody a premodern worldview I said that this comes out in their unwillingness to accept that shit happens, shit like Princess Diana's premature death in a car crash one night in Paris, or the murder of a charismatic young president by a maladjusted no-hoper like Lee Harvey Oswald. The religious impulse is to look for meaning, and one way to satisfy that impulse is to be a Conspiracy Theorist.

All of this might make it seem that Conspiracy Theories are ultimately rather benign, even if they are false. Why knock them if they help some people to cope with the ups and downs of life and politics? Shouldn't they, and the people who believe them, be viewed with sympathy if it's true that Conspiracy Theories are an understandable psychological response to adversity? Up to a point, yes; but it's also important not to forget that the extremist political ideologies that some Conspiracy Theories promote are pretty repugnant. The harm that Conspiracy Theories do needs to be weighed against their very limited benefits.

When it comes to the downside of Conspiracy Theories, the discussion so far has only really scratched the surface. Whatever the consolations of conspiracism or the truth about why some people end up being conspiracy-minded while others do not, the important question is whether Conspiracy Theories are ultimately harmful or beneficial to those who believe them and to society more generally. I'll tackle this question in chapter 3, which is about the actual consequences rather than the causes of conspiracism. These consequences are, or should be, unwelcome.

Meanwhile, the take-home message of this chapter is that there is no simple answer to the question why people are conspiracy-minded. Sometimes it's because of their wider political or ideological commitments. Or it's a response to being marginalised or conspired against. Or it's because Conspiracy Theories satisfy a spiritual need. Or it's some

combination of these factors, or something completely different that I haven't mentioned. There is no single or simple explanation of conspiracy mindedness; but there was never any serious hope of that. The answer to the question why people believe Conspiracy Theories is: it's complicated.

Notes

1 *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

2 Cass Sunstein, *Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas* (Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 12.

3 Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories* (Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015), p. 17.

4 Ibid.

5 T. Goertzel, 'Belief in conspiracy theories', *Political Psychology* 15 (1994): 731–42.

6 M. Wood, K. Douglas and R. Sutton, 'Dead and alive: Belief in contradictory conspiracy theories', *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3 (2012): 767–73.

7 V. Swami et al., 'Conspiracist ideation in Britain and Austria', *British Journal of Psychology* 102 (2011): 443–63.

8 J. Bartlett and C. Miller, *The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, Extremism and Counter-Terrorism* (Demos, 2010).

9 P. Villeneuve and Y. Mao, 'Lifetime probability of developing lung cancer, by smoking status, Canada', *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 85 (1994): 385–8.

10 D. Freeman and R. Bentall, 'The concomitants of conspiracy concerns', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 52 (2017): 595–604.

11 Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds*, p. 149.

12 T. Crane, *The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist's Point of View* (Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 38.