

Presenting the Conspirators of the Conspiracy (Theory)

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Lyndon LaRouche believes that the psychedelic rock group, 'The Grateful Dead,' are a front for the British Secret Service's Occult Branch who were sent, by the Queen of England, to promulgate the drug sub-culture in the United States of America. This is simply one fight in the grandest and most philosophical Conspiracy of all time, the fight between the Empiricists, led by such luminaries as David Hume and Bertrand Russell against the Rationalists, most notably fronted by Immanuel Kant, in which the decadent Empiricists, generally characterised by the United Kingdom and New Europe, are seeking to force their hedonistic ways on the purity of the American Way of Life, which LaRouche identifies as the Rationalist Way, a philosophy of living that focuses on strict moral truths based upon reasoning rather than mere experience.

And you thought that you were missing out on being part of a global conspiracy...

In 1774 Adam Weishaupt founded a secret society which he named the Illuminati, a group that specialised in the infiltration and taking over of Freemason lodges. Although it was officially disbanded in 1785 by edict of the

Bavarian Government the Illuminati simply focused their attention on France, which was going through a period of political upheaval, and orchestrated the First French Revolution in 1789. Weishuapt himself had, by this time, emigrated to the Americas and replaced a now deceased George Washington at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 where he, and other like-minded Illuminati, brought about the formation of the United States of America. Scandals involving the ownership of slaves were created to make the loose knit collation of States one federally controlled Union. A depression was then orchestrated in the early twentieth century to ensure that American goods would proliferate overseas; medical experimentation on ethnic minorities soon followed, allowing, in the late twentieth century, for a global, American-run, pharmaceutical concern to come to dominance with the specific intention to introduce fluoride, a chemical agent known to make humans docile, into our domestic water-supplies, thus allowing the United States of America to bring about a New World Order, a one world government under one leader, a leader controlled by the Illuminati adepts.

In September 2001 eleven Middle-Eastern nationals hijacked four flights flying over the continental United States. Two of the planes they crashed into the World Trade Centre, toppling the Twin Towers. Their actions were designed to show the USA just how vulnerable it was and, to a certain extent, remind the American people of their implicit support, through the deeds of their democratically elected Government, for actions on foreign soil.

These examples are but three commonly believed contemporary Conspiracy Theories. One of them is considered acceptable, warranted even, by academic

voices such as ourselves, one of them posits godlike entities operating behind the scenes, conspiring against us whilst another presents a grandiose scheme by a former empire to topple a new superpower.

Conspiracy Theories, I argue, are commonly held beliefs; it is likely that everyone in this room believes in at least one Conspiracy Theory and yet, at least for this audience, I would also expect most of you to be thinking ‘Yes, but...’ In part this is because the term ‘Conspiracy Theory’ is so inadequately defined, so amorphous in use and so ubiquitously pejorative that your scepticism and horror at my suggestion is understandable; you believe in some theory about a particular conspiracy, not in Conspiracy Theories.

We are philosophers¹ By and large, we like precise terminology; we would like to think that we are all, if not on the same page, at least in the same section of the chapter of the book on the subject when it comes to debate. The question I want to pose (and will answer) is whether Philosophers and Conspiracy Theorists are talking about the same thing when it comes to talking about Conspiracy Theories.

Robin Ramsay, political journalist and editor of ‘Lobster,’ a UK magazine that specialises in covering Political Conspiracies, recently argued that weird Conspiracy Theories such as Icke’s reptiloid conspiracy and the notion that a Bavarian professor of Theology in the 1780s is responsible for the USA’s current foreign policy are a distraction from serious academic debate on the subject of Conspiracy Theories. Weird Conspiracy Theories are the so-called elephant in the room.

Ramsay's argument seems to be that when we talk about Conspiracy Theories in a rigorous sense what we really are referring to are plausible political Conspiracy Theories and not the implausible weird Conspiracy Theories of LaRouche, David Icke and the like. Now, what Ramsay counts as being plausible may not be a good marker of serious vs. non-serious Conspiracy Theory rumination² but I think we can take his intuition and map it on to something philosophically interesting. In fact, we do not even really have to do much work at all, because Charles Pigden has already done most of it for us. In his 1995 article 'Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories?' (Pigden 1995) Charles dissects Karl Popper's definition of a Conspiracy Theory and argues, quite persuasively that Popper presented a strawman argument. (Popper 1945) Popper, in 'The Open Society,' argues that when people believe in Conspiracy Theories that they are committing themselves to belief in godlike conspirators. Pigden argues that this is not what we commonly understand as belief in Conspiracy Theories. Yes, some people do believe in divine-like plans hatched by Bavarians³ two hundred and fifty years ago but these, as examples of Conspiracy Theories, are simply not that very interesting. When people talk about Conspiracy Theories they usually really mean plots and capers hatched by fallible agents like ourselves. Pigden's argument and Ramsay's argument are suitably similar; both posit that a certain characterisation of belief in Conspiracy Theories is, if not wrong (in some sense of the word), misleading. The question I want to answer is whether we as an academic community have stuck with the 1945 Popper or moved, in 1995, on with Charles.

Why is this important? Well, consider this. A lot (if not most) atheists sincerely believe that theists take omniGod as their definition of what 'God' is. Most theists may even naively believe in omniGod, but when quizzed by atheists it turns out that most theists will go 'Hold on, that's not exactly what I mean at all.' OmniGod and theistic belief are not joined at the hip. In the same way, even though Conspiracy Theorists might well give examples of Conspiracy Theories that seem to cite conspirators who have godlike abilities, I think it will turn out, upon questioning, that such Conspiracy Theorists don't really believe in such creatures. The question is, do philosophers?

Let me further explicate what I shall call the two intuitions about conspirators.

The first intuition; conspirators are, functionally, godlike beings in our posited Conspiracy Theories. Here is an example. A recent article by Trevor Loudon and Bernard Moran argued that New Zealand's 1984 anti-nuclear stand was the result of an elaborate Soviet plot specifically designed to destabilise the ANZUS alliance and make New Zealand pro-Communist (Loudon and Moran 2007). Loudon and Moran imply that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union infiltrated the Socialist Unity Party in New Zealand in the late seventies and early eighties to specifically get New Zealand out of ANZUS. The SUP, the last pro-Soviet Union party of the former Communist Party of New Zealand was well known for being involved with Unions, although as its membership numbered less than five hundred individuals the party was hardly thought to have exerted much in the way of power in Socialist circles. Yet the Conspiracy Theory Loudon

and Moran presents has them infiltrating the Unions and the Labour Party under the orders of the KGB and the CPSU, a story that is then said to have supporting evidence by way of Dr. Bassett's public ruminations of just how fractured the Labour Party was under David Lange's leadership. Now, either this plot-cum-scheme-cum-Conspiracy Theory is very *post facto*, seeing how it was written well after the fact and the schemes and plans of our (assumed) Soviet masters have had their dastardly effect, or it is predicated on the conspirators, the KGB and the CPSU, being godlike, which is to say that their abilities to carry out their plan(s) were predicated on them being all-knowing, all-powerful and, as is usual for political Conspiracy Theories, pure evil.

'Godlike' here is a convenient stand-in term (I am more than willing to welcome suggestions for variant names) but I do think it carries across the gist of what I am talking about; sometimes the Conspiracy Theories we are presented with seem to have, as a vital part of them, claims about, people and organisations that resemble gods more than they resemble normal human beings such as ourselves. Take the claims of the 9/11 Truthers, those Conspiracy Theorists who claim that 9/11 was a plot designed and actioned by the Government of the United States of America. The claim that Bush and associates planned the destruction of the Twin Towers via a controlled demolition triggered by two remote controlled planes requires that the putative conspirators have what seem to be godlike abilities. Explosives had to be planted over a period of several months... without being seen by the thousands of people, day and night, who worked in the twin towers. The people supposedly on the

planes had to be disposed of or kept silent. This level of godlike control does not seem to be reflected by the same administrations total inability to construct a plausible cover story for their invasion of Iraq⁴. The 9/11 Truthers seem to be positing, at least in regard to the events of September 11th, 2001, near omnipotent powers to the conspirators and people involved in faking the Al Qaeda attack upon American sovereign soil.

This intuition, that conspirators are godlike beings, appears often enough in the literature that it seems like it could be, if not the source, a source for a lot of our concerns about the plausibility and warrant of Conspiracy Theories. By and large, we are suspicious of stories that suggest that there are godlike beings who stride upon the Earth like Colossus and whose works, mysterious and arcane, control our lives. Now, given that I think we are, generally, suspicious of such stories in other contexts the question becomes do Conspiracy Theorists actually believe in the existence of such godlike conspirators? I would hazard a guess to say that, yes, some Conspiracy Theorists do believe in them, in the same respect that some theists do believe that everything is, directly, the will of the gods. No matter our opinion of such beliefs, however, I think it is safe to say that such beliefs are not considered normal, in that we do not usually expect people to hold them and when we find an example of a Conspiracy Theorist (or a theist) who does we often look for reasons other than their mere belief to explain why they would posit such non-normal views. If this is a plausible way to construe the phenomena, and I think it is, then advocates like Ramsay are right to argue that belief in godlike conspirators are the elephant in the room. We can, and

usually do, explain away these anomalous beliefs with an analysis that, by and large, has nothing to do with them being beliefs in Conspiracy Theories.

A response to this claim might well go something like this. “Well, Matthew, that is all fine and good, but some Conspiracy Theorists, like the aforementioned Loudon and Moran and those 9/11 Truthers, do seem to put forward godlike conspirators. Maybe they are confused by what they really mean, but even so, what’s said is said, what what, eh.”

And I’d reply ‘Yes, but...’

Part of the problem, I think, is that we (and I’m going to talk here about we as academics, specifically philosophers) read Conspiracy Theories as being *prima facie* irrational and unwarranted. I am going to argue that we’re being uncharitable in our interpretation of the role of conspirators in these Conspiracy Theories.

Because most of us assume that Conspiracy Theories are unwarranted I think that most of us then fail to apply the *Principle of Charity* to the interpretation of the Conspiracy Theories of Conspiracy Theorists. We hear the elaborate plots, the *post facto* schemes and the like and assume that as these are examples of unwarranted beliefs that we need not give the Conspiracy Theorist a charitable reconstruction of her argument. In this respect it turns out that we are just like Popper; we end up accusing the Conspiracy Theorist of believing in a conspiratorial worldview where conspirators have some divine ability to carry out their plots and obtain their goals. Yet, as Pigden argued in 1995, that is not, by and large, what Conspiracy Theorists actually believe. They are more like the

supposed holders of the omniGod thesis; it looks as if they believe in such weird agents but, when suitably questioned, it turns out that they do not.

Take Loudon and Moran's Soviet Plot. I hardly think that they believe the Soviets to be in anyway godlike. Loudon and Moran are Libertarians (of the Objectivist variety) and whilst they think that the enemies of the Free Market are duplicitous and evil they do not, I think, believe them to be in any way omnipotent. Loudon and Moran might well want to present their Conspiracy Theory in such a way that it looks as if the KGB orchestrated a near perfect coup upon New Zealand, but to assume that this is what they mean is, I think, not to really engage with the material. Conspiracy Theories are, on some level, arguments designed to persuade and psychological features, such as making enemies 'more evil' and 'smarter than the average bear' are common tricks we should separate out from being relevant to the argument itself.

The same, I think, can be said for the 9/11 Truthers. Whilst I think the Conspiracy Theory that claims the American Government orchestrated 9/11 is implausible it does need to be noted that most 9/11 Conspiracy Theories run their putative rival explanations as arguments to the extent that, even given the massive amount of work required by the USA to destroy the Twin Towers (without anyone being none the wiser) it is still more implausible to think that eleven Middle-eastern 'terrorists' could have pulled it off. The 9/11 Truthers look as if they are positing godlike conspirators but, really, they are claiming the opposite; those who hold the Official (or Received) View of the event are the ones putting forward the existence of such wacky, godlike, agents.

So what do I think Conspiracy Theorists actually believe? Well, here comes the second intuition.

Conspirators are, fundamentally, human, fallible beings prone to fault and error in their machinations.

When we consider the incidence of historical Conspiracies⁵ the kinds of conspirators we end up with are normal human agents like ourselves, sometime organised into groups that are able to hatch wacky schemes and crazy capers. Take the assassination of Caius Iulius Caesar; Brutus, Brutus and associates plotted to kill the dictator and (on some accounts) restore the glory of the Roman Republic by returning power to the Senate. They were very successful in the act of killing; less successful in the act of restoring the Roman Republic because whilst the first of their assigned tasks was trivially easy the second was not and, being fallible human agents rather than gods, they were unable to carry it out. The Show Trials of 1930s Communist Russia is just another example of the same; no matter how hard the Soviet Union tried to hide the evidence of the fabrication and trumping up of charges against Leon Trotsky and his associates the fallibility of people within the group of conspirators let the side down.

I argue that Conspiracy Theorists intend to use the second, fallible, sense, of ‘conspirator’ in their Conspiracy Theories. The use of the first sense, the godlike, in a Conspiracy Theory seems to make belief in a putative Conspiracy *prime facie* suspect⁶ but not so the second instance. If we accept the second sense as what Conspiracy Theorists actually mean by ‘conspirator(s),’ then we cannot be outright dismissive of Conspiracy Theories merely because of the

inclusion of supposedly godlike conspirators; we would need to look at the very nature of Conspiracy Theories as arguments-cum-explanations⁷.

An obvious response to my argument thus far is that I am treating Conspiracy Theorists and Philosophers unequally. I am applying the *Principle of Charity* to the utterances of Conspiracy Theorists but not to Philosophers. Maybe Philosophers also do not mean what I suspect they imply by their hasty dismissal of Conspiracy Theories. I freely admit that my treatment of the two camps, so to speak, is unequal, but I do not think it is unfair. Conspiracy Theorists, by and large, are not Philosophers and they can be forgiven for being imprecise in the formulations of their Conspiracy Theories. Philosophers, however, I hold to a higher standard of discourse and debate. Whilst I think we have good grounds to be charitable in our interpretations of Conspiracy Theories given by Conspiracy Theorists do not think the same holds to the proclamations of Philosophers. Philosophers should not imply one thing and intend another. We should be less charitable and more rigorous in regard to the utterances and arguments within our discipline than we should be towards people outside of it.

So, having spoken a little about Conspiracy Theorists, and potentially chastised a whole host of philosophers, what do the philosophers of Conspiracy Theories say?

My answer to this question is based upon (for this talk) the most recent issue of *Episteme* which, helpfully, was entirely given over to discussion of Conspiracy Theories. The recent issue of *Episteme* includes the ‘old hands’ (Charles Pigden, Brian L. Keeley, Steve Clarke, David Coady et al) and some

new voices (Peter Mandik, Neil Levy), so it helpfully tells us whether the discipline has really taken notice of the last thirteen years of (admittedly sporadic but thus far easily readable) literature.

Brian L. Keeley, in ‘God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theorist’ argues that Conspiracy Theories are relativised to non-omnipotent agents (Keeley 2007)⁸. Keeley’s conspirators are not gods but their plots and schemes can be hidden (and interpreted) in such a way that they look godlike.

Steve Clarke, in ‘Conspiracy Theories and the Internet’ also runs a non-omnipotent line but argues that conspirators could look godlike because of the reliance, in Conspiracy Theories, upon errant data (Clarke 2007); because Conspiracy Theories look over explanatory (or too complete) conspirators end up looking godlike when, in fact, they are not. The Conspiracy Theory, then, as an example of an explanation, makes conspirators look godlike because of its seemingly *post facto* nature.

Both Clarke and Keeley are arguing that conspirators are not godlike but rather that the presentation of Conspiracy Theories makes them look so. David Coady, in ‘Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational?’ argues that the reason why we treat the term ‘Conspiracy Theory’ as being pejorative is because we automatically assume a belief in godlike conspirators on behalf of Conspiracy Theorists. (Coady 2007)

We are, then, in agreement. Our point of difference, if there really is one, is that I suspect Keeley and Clarke (and possibly Coady) place the blame for the apparent presence of godlike conspirators in Conspiracy Theories upon the

Conspiracy Theorists themselves, whilst I suspect the blame really should be put upon you and me. I think we read in the existence of godlike conspirators because we are not suitably charitable in our interpretation of what Conspiracy Theorists intend. Conspiracy Theories could be considered to be examples of explanation sketches and one feature of an explanation sketch is often an implicit understanding between the explainer and the explainee that certain terms are being used in less than precise ways. It is a little like the use of ‘valid’ in the vulgate; we may find it offensive but common usage sometimes trumps philosophical concerns.

Keeley, Clarke and Coady are the ‘old hands’ in the philosophy of Conspiracy Theories. Peter Mandik, in ‘Shit Happens’ is new and he argues that Conspiracy Theorists cannot believe in any Conspiracy Theories because there should be no evidence for the Conspiracy Theory. If Conspiracies occur, then the conspirators will act in secret, and for any Conspiracy to be considered successful, then it must be kept perfectly secret. We should have no evidence whatsoever for a Conspiracy Theory that the Trotsky Trials were staged, or that Brutus, Brutus and associates plotted to kill the dictator Caius Iulius Caesar, and so forth. Mandik believes that Conspiracy Theorists must believe in godlike conspirators (Mandik 2007) (and, oddly, that they cannot be Conspiracy Theorists at all, because they do not believe in anything called a Conspiracy Theory).

This is problematic. Firstly, it simply does not map an intuition I think we all have; some Conspiracy Theories are warranted (like the Dewey Commission’s claims about the Trotsky Trials). Mandik’s ‘total’ secrecy, however, would

indicate that no Conspiracy Theory could ever turn out to be a (before the revelation) justified belief about conspiratorial activity.

Secondly (and relatedly), by denying that Conspiracy Theories cannot become examples of Conspiracies Mandik ends up denying large chunks of History. Now, perhaps what he is suggesting is that our notion of historical explanations is at fault and that Conspiracy Theories cannot be classified as being appropriately explanatory but, I suspect, that case would be, at least partially, based upon asserting that Conspiracy Theorists believe in godlike conspirators which, as I have already argued, does not seem to be the case⁹.

Thirdly, Mandik's claims go against what people commonly believe about Conspiracy Theories. Mandik is echoing (and he admits it) Popper's line from 1945. Yet Popper's argument is no more relevant now than it was then. It might be considered to be politically expedient to assume that all Conspiracy Theories are unwarranted, but wishful thinking does not an argument make.

Still, you might argue, one voice, Mandik, among many, Pigden et al, is hardly a reason to have qualms about Philosophy's intention towards Conspiracy Theories. To which I would say, again, 'Yes, but...' Whilst David Coady was the ostensible editor of the most recent issue of *Episteme* the final say on what went into it was Alvin Goldman's. Now, I am not suggesting there is any Conspiracy happening here, but the fact that Mandik's Popperian paper was accepted and published might well indicate that whilst people specifically working in the philosophy of Conspiracy Theories have moved on with Pigden that there is still the worry that philosophers in general may not have. Now, admittedly, the

philosophical discussion of Conspiracy Theories as a worthwhile pursuit is only a mere thirteen years old (this year). Popper's declarations on the subject in 1945 essentially closed off discussion on the subject until Pigden challenged his orthodoxy in 1995. Philosophers such as Mandik¹⁰ show that the old academic prejudice about Conspiracy Theories is still alive and well. I think that this shows that there is a very real need here for someone to provide the definitive taxonomy of the Conspiracy Theory which can then be used to gain a proper understanding of the Conspiracy Theory as a species of explanation and as a species of argument.

My focus, in this talk, has been with what Conspiracy Theorists intend rather than what we, as philosophers, take them to say. Once we have investigated this concern to do with intentionality then we can, using the *Principle of Charity*, analyse the content of the Conspiracy Theory. Conspiracy Theories may look *prima facie* unwarranted but if this merely means that you think such theories posit godlike entities, then your supposed *prima facie* case is itself unwarranted. This little talk can be seen as a motivating factor for working in the philosophy of Conspiracy Theories; once we get rid of the initial academic prejudice towards Conspiracy Theories we really need to have a set of principled reasons to justify our scepticism.

More news on that as it comes to hand.¹¹

Notes

¹And hello there to anyone who has joined us from ‘outside.’

²Ramsay, for instance, thinks it is plausible that the CIA has been using implant-based mind control devices since the 1990s (Ramsay 2006, p. 102).

³Note, I have Bavarian ancestry, so watch out in question time...

⁴A job you would have thought to have been easier, given that 9/11 occurred on US soil and thus would have been harder to hide the evidence of whilst the weapons of mass destruction were, supposedly, in Iraq and thus the evidence for much more easily forged.

⁵Potential problem; talking here about Conspiracies rather than Conspiracy Theories...

⁶In re the theistic stuff there is much to be made out of right wing Christian Conspiracy Theories...

⁷Which will be the focus of a chapter in the thesis...

⁸His analysis is quite different to my own; he is using a variation of the hiddenness objection to argue that religious arguments and Conspiracy Theories are related

⁹The article I am refraining from commentating upon in this talk, Neil

Levy's, does argue that Conspiracy Theories aren't appropriately explanatory, for reasons that probably are related to supposing godlike conspirators, but we don't have time for that.

¹⁰And subsequent revisions will hopefully cite other examples...

¹¹Additional material I could cover: Is there a role for the first sense? Is the godlike notion the normative form of Conspirator?

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