Stefano Pirisi

Paper presented at the SLSA 2021 Conference - Epistemic Injustice Session

Constructing the Irrational Other. Epistemic Injustice, Depoliticization and Pathologization in the field of Conspiracy Theories Studies.

> But whereas the scientific apparatus (ours) is led to share the illusion of the powers it necessarily supports, that is, to assume that the masses are transformed by the conquests and victories of expansionist production, it is always good to remember that we mustn't take people for fools.
>
> (De Certeau 2002:176)

Fricker defined testimonial injustice as «the injustice that a speaker suffers in receiving deflated credibility from the hearer *owing to identity prejudice on the hearer's part*» (2007: 4). With this contribution I would like to look at a case in which the scientific-institutional construction of the speakers identity, in this case of the identity of a wide group of people, directly deprives him/her of epistemic credibility.

The case will be that of the "conspiracist" (or "conspiracy theorist") identity (a word, "conspiracist" which should rigorously be spelled between quotes). It is almost impossible not to already have an idea of what the "conspiracist" could be, as we are talking about probably one of the most used words in the political landscape during the last decade. Just remembering how much the label "conspiracist" has been used since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, or how many times we have heard that the Washington D.C. capitol riot was related to the spread of "conspiracy theories", and that those taking part to the riots were "conspiracists", should be enough to understand the contemporary political significance of this social identity.

What does it mean, though? What are "conspiracy theories" and who are "conspiracists"?

We could say that a "conspiracy theory" is the reconstruction of an event that involves the identification of a conspiracy, where the conspirators are members of "the elite" in some way affecting/afflicting "the people". As for a "conspiracist", accordingly, we could offer the most minimal definition possible: a person who believes this type of reconstruction to be true.

Yet, only armed with such a minimal definition, we wouldn't be able to properly explain why this term has become so widespread in contemporary times. After all, throughout history many conspiracies did actually take place, and thus, in a way, not being a "conspiracist" would mean to refute many, official, historically accurate reconstructions of major historical events.[1]

---

1   In fact, going even deeper, it would probably mean that such a non-conspiracits believes that a vast community of

In order to properly understand the value of "conspiracist" and "conspiracy theory" as a politically charged label, we need to take into account, as Bratich has argued, «its external discursive position» (2008: 2). By doing so, we can see how "conspiracist" and "conspiracy theory" have become labels used to denigrate any speaker whose opinion sounds fringe, unmotivated or based on the belief that some sort of malevolent conspiracy is taking place; a slur that connotes the speaker as either irrational, paranoid, just plain crazy or, at least, quite stupid (see Husting & Orr 2007; Husting in Dentith 2018). "Conspiracist" is, in fact, quite a strong performative slur, one that is capable of disqualifying not only "lay" people from the public debate, but even politicians, experts and academics (see Martin 2020). The list of those unfortunate speakers that were labelled "conspiracists" and consequently lost any form of credibility is indeed a long one, and I believe is destined to grow even bigger as, lately, virtually any form of disbelief or dissent towards the official account of facts runs the risk of being labelled an irrational "conspiracy theory".

The fact that the widespread use of such labels actively creates forms of testimonial injustice has been widely analysed, and will not be at the centre of my paper (see, for example, Husting and Orr 2007; Dentith 2018; Coady 2018; Hagen 2020; Martin 2020). Here, I will be looking at the discursive construction of the "conspiracist" subject within the field of social psychology. I will look at the ways in which the correlation between conspiracy theorizing and irrationality has been, and is being, scientifically (with scientific authority) established within a series of social psychology studies, all of which currently inform the everyday practice of radicalization prevention networks such as the European *Radicalization Awareness Network*.

The present work will be thus an exploration of the ways in which a subjectivity deprived of its epistemic credibility can be systematically and scientifically constructed. In order to keep my contribution brief and concise, I will be looking at three discoursive forms that devoid the "conspiracist" of its credibility, which I will call *generalization, pathologization,* and *de-rationalization*, providing examples taken directly from the social psychology literature on the subject.

Only one last disclaimer before dwelling into the case. The studies I will be analysing are the products of a scientific community focusing on the social psychological study of "conspiracy theories" and "conspiracists". Psychological science's interest in this field could be traced back to Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964), one of the first works that posited a connection between "conspiracism" and paranoia, thus legitimating the application of psychological jargon to a political issue such as this one. Mostly sporadic through years following, psychologists interventions in the debate over "conspiracism" became more and more frequent during the last two decades, with 9/11 as a watershed moment, to such an extent that at the present time the vast

---

historians is working together to mystify histotical reality: a conspiracy.

majority of the academical written production on the subject is dominated by the influence of psychological theories and informed by social psychology. Even though I will be mentioning it, I will not be dealing here with the scientific, epistemological, validity of these researches: a thorough deconstruction of the scientific value of similar researches has already been offered, mostly focusing on the (highly problematic) way in which the individual's *belief* in conspiracy theorie*s* is usually *measured* (Dentith 2018; Coady 2018; Hagen 2020).

General Conspiracists

The very first way in which the "conspiracist" is deprived of his/hers credibility directly relates to the, mostly implicit, definition of "conspiracy theories" as a unitary whole sharing a common general trait: being false. Within the social psychology literature a series of discursive operations render this unitary account possible. I would like to look at some of them, without any claim to be exhaustive.

Fist of all we can identify a form of reductionism: a word or a single line is supposed to be sufficient in order to describe a "conspiracy" in which people *believe*. We can focus, for instance, on the *Generic Conspiracy Belief Scale*, a psychometric instrument developed by Brotherton et al. (2013) in order to measure how much an individual shares a 'conspiracy mentality' (which we'll be looking at later on). A 15-items questionnaire[2] is administered to the individuals taking part to the test, a questionnaire in which participants have to assign a score (from 1 to 5) to express how much they agree of disagree with a "conspiracy theory". Here are a few examples of these "conspiracy theories": '*the government is involved in the murder of innocent citizens and/or well-known public figures, and keeps it secret* '; '*New and advanced technology which would harm current industry is being suppressed*' '; '*Certain significant events have been the result of the activity of a small group who secretly manipulates world events* '; and so on. Reduced to a single line, completely out of context, each of these sentences is considered to be a "conspiracy theory" in which people allegedly believe: it doesn't really matter why someone could or would believe in, for instance, the government's involvement in the murder of innocent citizens, it doesn't matter whether such an event actually happened, it doesn't even matter which government we are talking about or when this test is being taken. If you agree with these sentences then there is a high probability that you hold what the authors call, quoting a study by Aaronovitch (2009), a *conspiracist belief* : «the unnecessary assumption of conspiracy when other explanations are more probable» (Brotherton et al. 2013: 1).

Similarly, another example of reductionism, quite often a conspiracy theory becomes nothing more than a title. In a recent study by Rottweiler and Gill on the link between "conspiracy beliefs"

---

2   The questionnaire is available online at: https://openpsychometrics.org/tests/GCBS/

and "violent extremism", we find a seemingly innocuous list of recently emerged "conspiracy theories": «9/11, climate change, the deaths of Osama bin Laden and Princess Diana, flat Earth, chemtrails and anti-vaccine beliefs, QAnon, 5G networks and many more» (2020: 2). This time, as if any single one of these conspiracy accounts could be reduced to a *title*, something that allows to promptly represents the beliefs held by "conspiracist", we are offered a list of supposedly self-explanatory one-liners which signify something *if and only if* we accept that they are all nothing but "conspiracy theories" in the derogative sense of the expression: illegitimate beliefs.

Secondly we can look at how these "conspiracy theories" are *conflated*: the previous list is still a valid example. Only due to the fact that these beliefs are supposed to be basically the same thing, we can find completely unrelated theories – conspiarcy theories regarding «climate change, the deaths of Osama bin Laden and Princess Diana, flath Earth, chemtrails and anti-vaccine beliefs» – grouped together. Conflating different theories under the same umbrella also works as a disqualification tool. The *9/11 truth movement* might be quite a big, internally diverse and often internally conflicting organization, within which numerous "conspiracy accounts" cohabit, each of them different, either reasonable or unreasonable, grounded or groundless; and yet, as long as it is conflated with flat Earth conspiracies (a veritable trojan horse for the conspiracy theory discourse) it becomes nothing more than yet another conspiracy theory, an illegitimate belief.

This tendency to take all "conspiracy theories" to be the same thing, regardless of internal differences, without any sort of consideration for the particular case, has been strongly criticized by those advocating for a "particularist" approach to the study of conspiracy theories: in other words, simply looking at conspiracy theories one by one, evaluating every single case (see Dentith 2018).[3] A long back-and-forth between "particularists" on one side and "generalists" on the other has filled quite a number of pages within various journals such as the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* journal. Here I would like to quote just one of the latest articles by a representative of the generalist faction, an article in which Wagner-Egger et al. (2019) argue that *all* conspiracy theories are unhealthy and, accordingly, must be prevented, debunked and fought. Among the various arguments, mostly based on the social psychological pathologization that we will be looking at shortly, one in particular is supposed to demonstrate that conspiracy theories, are, in general, false: what the authors call the statistical argument. Let me quote the passage at length:

> For the sake of the argument, let us say that there are 50 different conspiracy theories [regarding a single event], which is below reality. There are only two epistemic possibilities. Either the official version is true, and the fifty

---

3   Let us note that this is indeed a strange request, which only makes sense within this peculiar field of study in which it is generally held that any theory involving a conspiracy has to be considered both false and dangerous. It would be hard to image a similar request in any other field of knowledge, colonial ethnography being a dishonorable exception. In a way, we could think of "conspiracists" as a contemporary equivalent of the ethnographer's "primitive societies".

conspiracy theories are false, or one conspiracy theory is true and the forty-nine others and the official version are false. In any case, the huge majority of conspiracy theories are false. In view of this statistical argument (one CT that turned to be true against thousands of false or at best unverified CTs), when considering all conspiracy theories to be false we will be correct at a very close rate of 100% (2019: 51-52).

The authors affirm that they are relying here «on scientific reasoning» which «can be used to evaluate any kind of hypotesis» (ibid.). In fact, this is just another case of generalization, improper grouping and conflation, other than faulty reasoning. As Kurtis Hagen has pointed out, «one could just as well say that there are fifty-one epistemic possibilities – including the official account – all of which are unlikely, so we shouldn't believe any of them. The rhetorical effect of Wagner-Egger et al.'s analysis depends entirely on their own decision to group conspiracy theories together and oppose them to a single privileged theory, even though the privilege of that theory is precisely what is in question» (2020: 8).

Yet all these problems do not seem to stick within the social psychological study of conspiracy theories. In general, "conspiracy theories", are still considered to be false, all of them, since there is no difference whatsoever between various conspiracy accounts. This line of reasoning legitimizes a question: why do people believe in this false nonsense? The conclusion: there must be something wrong with them. Here we come to the issue of pathologization and de-rationalization.

Pathologic Conspiracists

Pathologizing conspiracist begins by positing that there is something inherently wrong in the very mental processes of those that believe in conspiracy theories. A 2010 study by Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham, was one of the first to focus on «personality and individual difference variables, in the expectation that general psychological traits allow for the construction of a profiling model of conspiracist individuals» (Swami et al. 2010: 751). Among other discoveries, the authors found out that a single factor score, a numerical value, can be computed in order to define the «General Conspiracist Belief» of an individual: his or her general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories. Also called «conspiracist ideation» (Swami et al. 2011), this measure is supposed to demonstrate that the belief in a single conspiracy theory is a reliable predictor for general conspiracy thinking: in other words, according to what these studies allegedly demonstrated, if you believe in a single conspiracy theory then you very often believe in many others. The study, by providing the participants with a series of made up conspiracy theories and asking them to numerically rate how much they agreed with them, also supposedly demonstrated that those holding "general conspiracists beliefs" even believe in completely fictitious theories.

 In a similar vein, a study by Wood, Douglas and Sutton (2012) presented participants with a

series of mutually contradictory theories regarding the death of Osama bin Laden and Princess Diana. Participants were then asked to, once again, rate (on a scale from 1 to 6) their agreement to each of these theories as well as the degree to which they believed that a each theory was plausible, convincing, worth considering and coherent. Elaborating the data thus collected, the authors found out that "conspiracists" even believe in mutually contradictory conspiracy theories: for "conspiracists" «believing that Osama bin Laden is still alive is apparently no obstacle to believing that he has been dead for years» (Wood et al. 2012: 772) as the study demonstrated. This finding, even though this research does not actually demonstrate anything of this sort (as shown by Hagen, in Dentith (2018)), has been quoted *ad nauseam* since the article was published.

Among those referencing it we find the developers of a concept that has done much in the way of pathologizing "conspiracism". In a 2014 article, revitalizing a notion originally coming from Serge Moscovici, Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder proposed that a «conspiracy mentality» is what determines people's belief in conspiracy theories. The conspiracy mentality, in their words, «predisposes individuals to attribute significant events to the intentional actions of mean-intending groups of individuals who are sufficiently powerful to carry out the suspected conspirational act» (2014: 26). Those sharing a conspiracy mentality, thus, think in such a way that, for instance, «individuals high in conspiracy mentality will attribute the present [2014] financial crisis to the coordinated actions of greedy managers and bankers rather than systemic dynamics in a complex economy» (ibid.).

In order to measure how much does one hold a conspiracy mentality across culture, in a way that is not closely bound to a specific temporal and geographical context, the authors also proposed the *Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire* (CMQ), «a short (5-item) measure of generic conspiracy beliefs» (Bruder et al. 2013: 2). Examples of these items are: '*I think that there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions*', and '*I think that many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about*', items that have to be rated by the participants according to their belief in a scale from 1 to 10.

This instrument became widely used within the field of social psychological researches on "conspiracism", and is currently one of the most common system to measure *how much* someone has a "conspiracy mentality". A person believing in a conspiracy theory has thus scientifically become someone who's plagued by a conspiracy mindset. Evidently, judging from these findings, there's something epistemically problematic in those that have a conspiracy mentality: quoting Ted Goertzel (1994), "conspiracists" are *monological thinkers*, close-minded people that only speak to themselves.

To quote one last study by Rottweiler and Gill (2020), a long list of pathological reasons, all of which are grounded in social psychology research, can now be offered in order to explain why

people believe "conspiracy theories": «Low level of trust, perceived powerlessness, feelings of anomia and an associated lack of control and feelings of uncertainty have been further linked to conspiracy beliefs. […] Research suggests that individuals are susceptible to conspirational thinking when existential needs, such as feeling safe and in control of one's environment, are threatened. Thus, the endorsement of conspiracy theories may act as a coping mechanism in order to deal with existential problems» (Rottweiler & Gill 2020:3).

Irrational Conspiracists

The border between practices of de-rationalization and pathologization is not so easily drawn: the identification of a faulty mindset always implies the irrationality of the analysed individual, as well as pointing to the alleged epistemic faults of "conspiracists" always implies a negative evaluation of their ability to think rationally. Yet, by referencing to de-rationalization as a specific form of subjectivity construction, I aim to look at those discursive practices that, without directly pathologizing the subject, nonetheless implicitly construct him as someone who's unaware of why he is saying what he is saying, someone deprived of the control over his own beliefs.

A first example, the already mentioned association between "conspiracists" and *monological systems of belief* (Goertzel 1994). In this case, what the "conspiracist" believe in is nothing but the product of a closed mind, a system of belief that only speaks to itself, unable to communicate: thus he believes in a conspiracy only because there's something wrong with him on a epistemic level, with regards to his capacity to use "rationality" in a proper manner.

Similarly, Brotherton and French (2014) suggest that conspirational thinking is highly correlated with susceptibility to the *conjunction fallacy*, «a specific error of probabilist reasoning whereby people overestimate the likelihood of co-occurring events» often associated within the social psychology literature with belief in the paranormal («paranormal believers [tend] to base judgements on their subjective perception of the representativeness of certain coincidences rather than objective probabilist laws») (2014: 238-239).

Quite often, "conspiracism" is associated with the incapacity to properly exercise critical or analytical thinking. For instance Swami et al. (2010) argue that «the popularity of such beliefs may reflect an incapacity among politically-motivated individuals of exercising sufficient critical judgements» (2010: 760). Another study, once again led by Viren Swami, directly addresses the question whether analytic thinking reduces beliefs in conspiracy theories (Swami et al. 2014). The answer is positive: «belief in conspiracy theories [is] significantly negatively correlated with analytic thinking stile and open-minded thinking, and positively correlated with intuitive thinking style and need for closure» (2014: 576). "Conspiracists", which within the context of this study are defined as people that believe in «a subset of false beliefs», are apparently both intuitive and in

search of easy-to-think solutions to uncertain situations: lost in a complex world that they are unable to understand, they fall prey to false beliefs which, at least, alleviate their epistemic needs for closure.

Following such a de-rationalized representation, we can find a series of handbooks and guidelines which have become, thanks to their influence within the European Radicalization Awareness Network, a point of reference for EU practitioners in the field of counter-radicalization. Barlett and Miller's *The Power of Unreason* (2010), develops a series of recommendations for governments on this matter. One, in particular, is aimed at UK's "Prevent" agenda: since conspiracy theories spread because of people's inability to think properly, the government «should focus more on programmes that encourage critical thinking», especially directing their efforts towards young people as «it is not clear they have the critical faculties to navigate the many bogus claims they encounter. While government cannot tell people *what* to think, they can help teach people *how* to think» (Barlett & Miller 2010: 6).

The Conspiracy Handbook (Lewandowsky et al. 2020), another publicly available collection of guidelines for counter-radicalization practitioners, also suggests that "conspiracists" should be «cognitively empowered […] encouraging them to think analytically rather than relying on intuition» (ivi: 9). The *Handbook*'s authors also argue for a groundbreaking strategy in order to prevent the spread of false beliefs: following a 2017 study by Jolley and Douglas, it is argued that an effective strategy could be what they call *inoculation*. Jolley and Douglas described inoculation as the practice of presenting anti-conspiracy arguments *before* people are exposed to conspiracy material, providing a (quasi-immunological) defence against the virus, the "conspiracy theory". It can also be noted that participants to this study were exposed to *fact-based*, rather than logic-based, anti-conspiracy arguments, since previous studies have shown that «applying logic to a problem might be more challenging than understanding that the facts being presented are incorrect» (Banas and Miller, quoted in Jolley & Douglas 2017: 460).

The "irrational" dissent

Reading against the grains of the contemporary social psychological literature on "conspiracism", we can see that the label is constructed in such a way that it becomes a rhetorical device to «deride [i.e. to pathologize and de-rationalize] those in Western countries who believe their governments, or other powerful institutions in their society, are engaged in conspiracies» (Coady, in Dentith 2018: 182). As a form of testimonial injustice, such labels as "conspiracists" and "conspiracy theory", once again with quoting Coady, «serve to castigate and marginalize anyone who rejects or even questions orthodox or officially endorsed beliefs» (ivi.: 183).

Furthermore, looking at its contextual uses – within, for instance, the European Radicalisation

Awareness Network, or, in the UK, in the context of the *PREVENT* strategy – by virtue of its role as expert-knowledge within securitarian policies and institutions, the social psychological discourse on "conspiracy theories" and "conspiracists" serves a precise political function, what I would call the de-politicization of radical dissent. By constructing fringe, "extremist", political reconstructions of events as the resultant of faulty reasoning or paranoid ideation, these studies actively support, and give scientific legitimation to, a de-politicized (mis)understanding of dissent. In addition, framing dissent and protest as the result of a "conspiracy mentality",[4] the social psychological discourse, not only silences "conspiracists", exercising a fair dose of testimonial injustice, but also forcludes the possibility of understanding this political matter, at the risk of further widening the political divide between the supposedly-rational consensus and the allegedly-irrational dissent.

Bibliography

Aaronovitch, David (2009) *Voodo Histories: The role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History*, Jonathan Cage, London.

Barlett, Jamie and Miller, Carl (2010) *The Power of Unreason. Conspiracy Theories, Extremism and Counter-Terrorism*, Demos, London.

Bratich, Jack Z. (2008) *Conspiracy Panics. Political Rationality and Popular Culture,* State University of New York Press, Oxford.

Brotherton, Robert et al. (2013) "Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale", *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 4, Article 279.

Brotherton, Robert and French, Christopher C. (2014) "Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Susceptibility to the Conjunction Fallacy", *Applied Cognitive Psychologyi,* Vol. 28, Issue 2, pp. 238-248.

Bruder, Martin et al. (2013) "Measuring Individual Differences in Generic Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Across Cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire", *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 4, published online, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225

Bruder, Martin and Imhoff, Roland (2014) "Speaking (Un-)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as a Generalised Political Attitude", *European Journal of Personality*, Vol. 28, Issue 1, pp. 25-43.

Coady, David (2018) "Psychology and Conspiracy Theories", in Coady & Chase (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Applied Epistemology*, Routledge, London, pp. 166-175.

De Certeau, Michel (2002) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University Of California Press,

---

4 «Our study demonstrates that people who hold a conspiracy mentality, which is charachterized by a mind-set or general propensity to endorse conspiracy theories, show stronger intentions to engage in violent extremism. These findings suggest that perceiving the world as ruled by malevolent and illegitimate forces may be driving extremist violence as it provides justification to use illegal means and normative political engagement seems futile» (Rottweiler & Gill 2020: 11).

Berkeley.

Dentith, Matthew R.X. (ed.) (2018) *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, Rowman & Littlefield, London.

Fricker, Miranda (2004) *Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Goertzel, Ted (1994), "Belief in Conspiracy Theories", *Political Psychology*, Vol. 15, Issue 4, pp. 731-742.

Hagen, Kurtis (2020) "Should Academics Debunk Conspiracy Theories?", *Social Epistemology*, Vol. 34, Issue 5, pp. 423-439.

Husting, Ginna & Orr, Martin (2007) "Dangerous Machinery: 'Conspiracy Theorist' as a Transpersonal Strategy of Exclusion", *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 30, Issue 2, pp. 127-150.

Jolley, Daniel and Douglas, Karen M. (2017) "Prevention Is Better than Cure: Addressing Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories", *Journal Of Applied Social Psychology*, Volume 47, Issue 8, pp. 459-469.

Lewandowsky, Stephan et al. (2020) *The Debunking Handbook*, Available online at https://sks.to/db2020. DOI:10.17910/b7.1182

Martin, Brian (2020) "Dealing With Conspiracy Theory Attributions", *Social Epistemology*, Vol. 34, Issue 5, pp. 409-402.

Rottweiler, Bettina & Gill, Paul (2020) "Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Extremist Intentions: The Contingent Effects of Self-efficacy, Self-Control al Law-related Morality", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, published online: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288

Swami, Viren et al. (2010) "Unanswered Questions: A Preliminary Investigation of Personality and Individual Difference Predictors of 9/11 Conspiracist Beliefs", *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 24, Issue 6, pp. 749-761.

Swami, Viren et al. (2011) "Conspiracist Ideation in Britain and Austria: Evidence of a Monological Belief System and Associations Between Individual Psychological Differences and Real-world and Fictitious Conspiracy Theories", *British Journal Of Psychology*, Vol. 102, Issue 3, pp. 443-463.

Swami, Viren et al. (2014) "Analytic Thinking Reduces Belief in Conspiracy Theories", *Cognition*, Vol. 133, Issue 3, pp. 572-585.

Wagner-Egger, Pascal et al. (2019) "Why 'Healty Conspiracy Theories' are (Oxy)morons: Statistical, Epistemological and Psychological Reasons in Favor of the (Ir)Rational View", *Social Epistemology Reply Collective*, Vol. 8, Issue 3, pp. 50-67.

Wood, Michael J. et al. (2012) "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories", *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, Vol. 3, Issue 6, pp. 767-773.