**Why We Should Be Suspicious of Conspiracy Theories. A Novel Demarcation Problem**

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**Abstract**

What, if anything, is wrong with conspiracy theories (CTs)? A conspiracy refers to a group of people acting in secret to achieve some nefarious goal. But given that the pages of history are full of such plots, why are CTs regarded with suspicion? Just like with the traditional demarcation problem (between science and pseudoscience), philosophers disagree about whether there are general ways to distinguish legitimate hypotheses about conspiracies from unfounded ‘conspiracy theories’. According to particularism, the currently dominant view among philosophers, there is no such demarcation line to be drawn. Each CT should be evaluated on its own merits, and the bad reputation of CTs as a class is undeserved. In this paper, I present a new defense of generalism, the view that there is indeed something *prima facie* suspicious about CTs. To demarcate legitimate theorizing about real-life conspiracies from “mere conspiracy theories” (in the pejorative sense), I draw on the principle of asymmetry between causes and effects, and show how it sheds light on classical problems of missing evidence and adhocness. Because of their extreme resilience to counterevidence, CTs can be seen as the epistemological equivalent of black holes, in which unwary truth-seekers are drawn, never to escape again. Finally, by presenting a general ‘recipe’ for generating novel CTs around any given event, regardless of the circumstances and the available evidence, I rescue the (generalist) intuition behind colloquial phrases like “That’s just a conspiracy theory”.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; epistemology; demarcation problem; falsifiability; generalism;

particularism

”Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t after you”

(Yossarian in Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*)

# **Introduction**

In polite company, it is frowned upon to profess belief in certain so-called “conspiracy theories” (CTs). Politicians, pundits, journalists and scientists widely employ the concept as a term of abuse. If something is branded as a conspiracy theory, that is sufficient reason to regard it with a healthy dose of skepticism, if not to dismiss it out of hand. This negative connotation is widespread in the media and in the public arena more generally (XXX). And yet, few people would deny that “conspiracies” – in the sense of secret plots hatched by a small group of people to achieve some nefarious goal – abound in history. It’s not for nothing that “criminal conspiracy” is a category of law in many legal systems. So where does the strong presumption against CTs come from? And where exactly should we draw the line between legitimate hypotheses about conspiracies and irrational CTs? Or is the bad reputation of CTs wholly undeserved?

For a number of years, analytic philosophers and epistemologists have taken an interest in CTs (Cassam, 2019; Coady, 2006; Dentith, 2014, 2018b; Pauly, 2020). How should we define a CT? When, if ever, is it rational to believe in CTs, and when should we reject them? Perhaps surprisingly, the majority view among philosophers now holds that, despite their unsavory reputation, there is nothing epistemically suspect about CTs (Dentith, 2018b; Pauly, 2020). Indeed, some philosophers have expressed rather strong opinions on the matter. According to Charles Pigden, the belief that there is something epistemically suspect about CTs is “one of the most dangerous and idiotic superstitions to disgrace our political culture” (Pigden, 2006, p. 139). In Matthew Dentith’s recent edited volume on CTs, which makes a rousing case for particularism, he and Lee Basham talk about an “anti-conspiracy theory panic”, which they characterize as “not only anti-rational and non-historical” but also “unethical and foolish” (Dentith & Basham, 2018, p. 91).[[1]](#endnote-1) In this paper, however, I feel obliged to make a case for (a form of) generalism. In particular, I intend to rescue the widespread intuitions underlying the pejorative connotations of the concept, and its derogatory use in the public arena. Though conspiracies really do occur and a blanket dismissal of all claims involving conspiracies would be as irrational as the must lurid conspiratorial phantasy, I hope to show that a *prima facie* suspicion of CTs is indeed justified.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, I look into the definition of both the terms conspiracy and conspiracy theory, drawing parallels with the traditional demarcation problem (sections 2.1-2.2). Next, drawing on a deep asymmetry between causes and effects in the historical sciences, I try to pinpoint exactly where legitimate theorizing about possible conspiracies ends and where we enter the realm of epistemically suspect CTs (2.3-2.4). In section 1, I analyze CTs as the epistemic equivalent of a black hole, in which unwary truth-seekers can be swallowed up, never to be seen again. Building further on these points, I present a simple and generic recipe for fabricating novel CTs about any given historical event (4.1), showing that, unlike legitimate accounts of genuine conspiracies, CTs are radically underdetermined by the available evidence (4.2). Finally, I show how my analysis undergirds the deeply evaluative connotations of CTs implicit in phrases like “That’s *just* a conspiracy” and “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but…” (4.3).

# **Demarcation of conspiracy theories**

## **Definitions**

To demarcate respectable hypotheses about conspiracies from unsubstantiated CTs, let us start out with a neutral, non-evaluative definition. According to Brian Keeley (2018, p. 423), a conspiracy theory denotes “a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret”. Perhaps the only descriptive element missing from this definition is that those who engage in a conspiracy usually (though not invariably) have nefarious intentions. A small minority of CTs are morally neutral, such as the belief that Elvis Presley staged his own death and went into hiding to escape the relentless media attention. In the overwhelming majority of CTs, however, the alleged conspirators engage in secrecy because their activities are illegal, criminal or otherwise nefarious. Elaborating on this element, Uscinski (2018, p. 48) has defined a conspiracy as a “secret arrangement between two or more actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions to benefit themselves at the expense of the common good”. Defined as such, the first and obvious thing to note about conspiracies is that they are all too real. Being social primates, we occasionally form secret coalitions to achieve certain goals, and most of the time these goals are nefarious, with a view to harming certain people or groups, or the public interest at large. The pages of history are full of such episodes. The murder of Julius Caesar was the result of a successful conspiracy, as was the October Revolution in 1917 in Russia and the terrorist plot of 9/11. Indeed, the majority of government putsches, revolutions, political assassinations and terrorist attacks in the historical record qualify as “conspiracies” under Keeley’s and Uscinski’s definition. If we understand “conspiracy theory” to simply refer to a proper historical account of just such an episode, then no sensible person would deny that it is rational to believe some CTs. As Cassam (2019, p. 3) writes, “in that sense we are *all* conspiracy theorists”.

But this is not how the term CT is typically used. Most historians would deny that these accounts of conspiracies are ‘conspiracy theories’ precisely *because* theybelieve them to true, confirmed, substantiated. When using the term CT, people commonly refer to a category of unofficial or unconfirmed theories that are rejected or at least not supported by reputable historians, journalists or other “epistemic authorities” (Levy, 2007). For instance, this includes the theory that the moon landing never happened and was faked in a Hollywood studio, that Lee Harvey Oswald was just a patsy of a larger conspiracy against JFK, that 9/11 was an inside job carried out by the Bush administration, or that the coronavirus Sars-Cov-2 which unleashed the 2020 pandemic was fabricated in some top-secret lab as a bio-weapon.

Again, most people who believe these conspiracist accounts of history would *not* agree that they are CTs, precisely because they believe them to be true (or at least plausible). Indeed, adherents of those beliefs will often use disclaimers like “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but…” or “This is not just a conspiracy theory”, in attempt to preempt accusations to that effect (Husting & Orr, 2007).[[2]](#endnote-2) Even those people who are widely regarded as conspiracy theorists, it seems, often adopt a negatively valued definition of “CTs”. As a result, though they will usually disavow the epithet for their own beliefs, they might well attach it to still other beliefs which they themselves find too extreme or far-fetched. For instance, a recent French documentary which exposes the (alleged) hidden agenda of medical experts and politicians during the COVID-19 pandemic bears the title “Ceci n’est pas un complot”.[[3]](#endnote-3) While the documentary makers go to great lengths to disavow the label, they are using it themselves to dismiss other, more extreme beliefs about the pandemic (beliefs about QAnon and a New World Order). In this way, both parties seem to accept the derogatory meaning of the phrase CTs – they just quarrel about where to draw the line. Indeed, psychological research shows that the negative valuation of CTs is not restricted to certain academic circles or cultural elites, but is widespread among the general population. The term “conspiracy theory” is deeply evaluative, “encoding information about epistemic deficiency” (XXX). But why then does the bad reputation of CTs run so deep?

## **Generalism vs. particularism**

In order to tell apart genuine conspiracies from unfounded CTs, it is instructive to draw some parallels with the traditional demarcation problem in philosophy of science, i.e. the project of separating genuine science from pseudoscience (Pigliucci & Boudry, 2013). Even more so than with “conspiracy theory”, the word “pseudoscience” is widely recognized as a term of abuse. If perhaps some conspiracy buffs have appropriated the label “conspiracy theorist” as a badge of honor, no-one has proudly proclaimed to be a “pseudoscientist”. At a first approximation, pseudoscience can be defined as those theories, activities and cognitive fields that aspire to scientific status, but are widely rejected by the scientific community. Of course, such a sociological criterion is not a genuine solution to the demarcation problem, or else philosophers would have declared victory long ago. Indeed, in the context of the demarcation problem, it can be seen as question-begging: we want to find out *why* the scientific community has ruled certain theories and practices out of court. Do they do this on a purely case-by-case basis, or are they (implicitly) employing certain general criteria?

In an analogous way, some CT scholars have baked ‘unofficial-ness’ into the definition of CTs, in order to distinguish them from genuine conspiracies that are acknowledged by mainstream historians and journalists (e.g. Levy, 2007; Uscinski, 2020). At a first approximation, this definition indeed holds water, but for philosophical purposes it is no more satisfying than the sociological ‘solution’ to the traditional demarcation problem. Again, such a definition merely postpones the answer to the epistemological question of interest: *why* is it that our experts accept some conspiratorial accounts of history, while rejecting others as “mere conspiracy theories”? Also, could it conceivably happen that those authorities are mistaken, and how to tell if this has occurred (Dentith, 2018a)? Even more so than with the old demarcation problem, the sociological criterion appears to beg the epistemological question. For instance, if the main thrust of the ‘inside job’ hypothesis about 9/11 is that official authorities are lying to us and covering up the true identity of the perpetrators, we cannot just dismiss this view on the grounds that it has been rejected by official authorities. That is precisely what one should expect, on the CT hypothesis![[4]](#endnote-4)

So are there any general (epistemic) criteria for distinguishing respectable hypotheses about conspiracies from deficient ones? Philosophers studying CTs are divided between what Buenting & Taylor have termed “generalists” and “particularists” (Buenting & Taylor, 2010; Dentith, 2018a, 2019; Keeley, 2018). Generalists believe that CTs are epistemically suspect as a class, or at least that CTs share certain common defects which go beyond the particulars of each individual theory. By contrast, particularists believe that no two CTs are alike, and that every one of them should be evaluated on its individual merits. Since there are no general reasons to distrust CTs, particularists believe, their bad reputation is wholly undeserved. This does not mean that particularists have a positive attitude towards all CTs, but merely that, as Dentith (2018a, p. 104) puts it “we have to assess such beliefs on a case-by-case basis”. Particularism about CTs now arguably commands the majority view among philosophers, with some (such as Lee Basham) having shifted towards the particularist camp (Dentith, 2018b, p. 139). Again, the distinction between particularism and generalism mirrors the history of the old demarcation problem (Pigliucci & Boudry, 2013). Generalists such as Karl Popper believe that pseudosciences share similar characteristics (namely, unfalsifiability) and can be diagnosed on general grounds. By contrast, particularists like Larry Laudan believe that bad theories come in all forms and shapes, and there are no short-cuts to evaluate and dismiss them as a class (Laudan, 1983).

In what follows, I will push back against particularism. Though particularists are right that a rational person should not prematurely dismiss every new hypothesis involving conspiracies, I believe that CTs suffer from certain recurring epistemic defects, and that a *prima facie* suspicion towards them is justified. Bad CTs are not just a miscellaneous bunch of theories that have nothing in common expect for the fact that they are not epistemically warranted. They are birds of a feather. By identifying the recurring flaws of CTs, and connecting this diagnosis to the proliferation of bad CTs, we can rescue the intuition that there is indeed something fishy about CTs.

## **Asymmetry of causes and effects**

A remarkable feature of CTs, which has been noted by a number of authors (Keeley, 1999; Lewandowsky et al., 2015), is that they lead us to expect an absence of evidence in their favor, or even the presence of counterevidence. If people with nefarious intentions are conspiring behind the scenes, we would reasonably expect them to try to cover up the evidence for their schemes. To the extent they have been successful in this effort, we will not readily find any positive evidence for the conspiracy. Stronger still, CTs may give us some reason to expect evidence *contradicting* the conspiracy. After all, one strategy which the alleged conspirators could use to throw us off the scent is to fabricate evidence for a rival, non-conspiratorial account.

In order to go ahead, we need to appreciate a deep asymmetry between causes and effects in the natural world. In historical sciences, effects typically overdetermine their causes, in the sense that a single past event ‘radiates’ into the future, leaving multiple and widespread effects, any of which bears the fingerprints of the originating cause (Cleland, 2002). If a historical event has actually occurred, we therefore usually find multiple lines of independent evidence attesting to its existence: material evidence, records, witnesses, first-hand accounts, etc. This also applies to the social events we call ‘conspiracies’, which involve (by definition) coordination and planning between several people. Even if the conspirators succeed in keeping their plan secret until its completion, the plot is bound to leave a number of effects that would allow a diligent investigator to reconstruct the conspiracy with the benefit of hindsight. The more complex and elaborate the conspiracy, the stronger this asymmetry between causes and effects.

If you look at some of the uncontroversial conspiracies acknowledged by historians and government authorities (e.g. the October Revolution, the Watergate affair, the 9/11 plot by Al Qaeda), you will find that their occurrence has radiated into the present, leaving numerous potential clues for historians and journalist to uncover. Indeed, in an indirect way, the documented incidents of conspiracies in mainstream history show that it is extremely difficult to commit the perfect crime, in which the perpetrators manage to erase *all* the effects of their actions. As Cleland (2002, p. 487) explains the asymmetry of overdetermination:

Footprints, fingerprints, particles of skin, disturbed dust, and light waves radiating outward into space must be eliminated. Moreover, it isn’t enough to eliminate just a few of these traces. Anything you miss might be discovered by a Sherlock Holmes and used to convict you. Finally, each trace must be independently erased. You cannot eliminate the footprints by removing particles of skin or, for that matter, one footprint by removing a different one.

It is instructive to have a look at the case of the 9/11 attacks, for which we both have an ‘official’ conspiracy theory (centered around Al Qaeda) and an unofficial CT which alleges that the attacks were an inside job carried out by the U.S. government and/or its associates. Even in the run-up to the attacks, according to the official version, Al Qaeda barely managed to keep its scheme secret. By the start of the new millennium, intelligence agencies were well aware of the existence of the organization and its intention to carry out terrorist attacks against U.S. targets, as evidenced for example by the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 and the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi in 1998. Well before the attacks, as Lawrence Wright (2006) has documented, and despite al-Qaeda’s careful attempts to erase their traces, evidence of the planning and preparation was ‘radiating’ in all directions, and had already reached the two main intelligence agencies of the U.S. federal government. Indeed, as Wright’s account convincingly demonstrated, between the two of them the CIA and FBI had amassed enough intelligence to put the pieces of the puzzle together and figure out what Al Qaeda was up to. The main reason why they failed to uncover and foil the plot was that both agencies were involved in a bureaucratic struggle for power, working at cross-purposes and refusing to share crucial pieces of information (Wright, 2006). In addition, both intelligence agencies were flooded with so much information that the ‘signals’ were being lost in the noise. But the signals were multifold, and had always been there.

In the aftermath of the attacks, and with the benefit of hindsight, the copious evidence for the plot immediately jumped out. Once the CIA knew what to look for, it became frustratingly obvious who was behind the attacks, and how exactly they had gone about staging it. Even though Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda initially denied any involvement in the plot, and only officially claimed responsibility in 2004, that confession was by then completely redundant. Because of the asymmetry between causes and effects, an elaborate scheme such as this one simply left too many traces to remain hidden. Indeed, on the evening of day of the attacks (around 9:30 pm EST), George Tenet, the then director of the CIA, could already inform the president that the Counterterrorist Center had gathered enough evidence to establish that Al-Qaeda was behind the attacks (Jacobsen, 2019, p. 294). In the following days and weeks, the identity of every hijackers was established and linked to the organization. Ever since, this conclusion has become ‘overdetermined’ by ever more evidence. Every stage of the plot (planning, preparation, execution) has been meticulously documented based on many different sources, which all reinforce the same conclusion about the identity of the perpetrators and the nature of their plot (Wright, 2006). Even if we possessed only a minute fraction of the available evidence, it would still allow us to figure out who was behind the 9/11 attacks.

In the case of unofficial CT about 9/11, however, such direct ‘positive’ evidence for the alleged conspiracy is entirely absent (Cassam, 2019). Defenders of the unofficial CT point to various anomalies and alleged contradictions in the official story, as well as a variety of unexplained eyewitness accounts and tantalizing clues (e.g. Griffin, 2008), but there is no smoking gun incriminating the U.S. government, in the form of documents, email conversations or phone records that demonstrate the preparation for the plot. Nor are there any testimonies or confessions from any of the accomplices. On the face of it, however, the principle of asymmetry teaches us that this is extremely unlikely. If anything, the plot envisaged by the unofficial CT is far more elaborate and complicated than the official plot involving Al Qaeda. For instance, according to the most popular CT account, the twin towers were brought down by controlled demolition rather than by the impact of the planes and the ensuing fires. According to demolition experts, however, preparing a large building for controlled demolition is a very complicated and laborious procedure that takes weeks or even months. Evidence for such a complicated string of events, requiring the cooperation of at least dozens or even hundreds of people, would be expected to radiate in all directions, proffering a wide array of consequences. But the unofficial CT requires us to believe that these huge buildings had been prepared for demolition in the weeks leading up to the attack without a single employee or visitor noticing anything suspicious, and without a single person spilling the beans afterwards.

## **Explaining absence of evidence**

According to a well-known dictum, absence of evidence does not constitute evidence of absence. From a probabilistic point of view, however, this is not entirely correct. Absence of evidence does constitute evidence of absence when the prior likelihood of finding such evidence (given the hypothesis under investigation) is high, in conformance with Bayes’ theorem (Pigliucci & Boudry, 2014). The reason why the missing evidence of controlled demolition undermines the ‘inside job’ hypothesis is that the asymmetry criterion gives us a very strong reason to expect such evidence, conditional on the actual occurrence of controlled demolition.

The example of 9/11 is clear-cut and – in this author’s view – leaves no room for reasonable doubt: the official conspiracy hypothesis is the only one that is remotely plausible. But not all alleged conspiracies require the level of complexity and scale that is necessitated by the ‘controlled demolition’ CT about 9/11. The CTs about the assassination of JFK, for example, may be comparatively small in scale and complexity: if JFK was assassinated on the orders of the Mafia, the plot could have been planned and executed by only a small number of people.

But even these CTs eventually run afoul of the asymmetry principle. In order to see this, we have to add a temporal dimension to our demarcation criterion. In the immediate aftermath of an event, it is often entirely reasonable to consider different working hypotheses, including those involving conspiracies. Even though it is doubtful whether the controlled demolition CT was ever a plausible hypothesis to explain the collapse of the Twin Towers, even right after the attacks, this is different for many other events. In this early stage, one should indeed abide by the dictum that absence of evidence does not constitute evidence of absence. It is rational for an investigator not to be deterred by an apparent absence of evidence for a conspiracy, or even by an apparent refutation of the conspiracy hypothesis. If the conspirators have been trying to erase their tracks, then we should not be surprised that we don’t readily find any evidence. Rejecting any suggestion of conspiracy at that early point can be as unreasonable as immediately jumping to the conclusion of a conspiracy. This is why some conspiracy accounts which were initially rejected by epistemic authorities – and indeed were sometimes branded as mere “conspiracy theories” in the pejorative sense – later ended up becoming part of textbook history (e.g. the Watergate scandal, or the Iran-Contra Affair).

As time wears on, however, the opportunities for finding positive evidence multiply, and the probability of *not* finding any such evidence, under the assumption of a conspiracy, is dwindling. As the event is investigated longer and more thoroughly, and yet fails to yield evidence for a conspiracy, the principle of asymmetry leads us into a dilemma. Either we accept that, under the assumption of a genuine conspiracy, an honest and diligent investigation would have discovered positive evidence by now, and hence absence of evidence indeed translates into evidence of absence. Or, alternatively, we conclude that there has been *no* diligent and honest investigation, because the investigators were themselves involved in the cover-up. But this would imply an ever larger conspiracy than we initially assumed, which – by the principle of asymmetry – would have radiated more effects for others to uncover. And the fact that we don’t find *that* evidence requires us to posit an even larger conspiracy, etc. In other words, the principle of asymmetry leads to a vicious regress, which requires us to (1) attribute ever more intelligence and power to the alleged conspirators and (2) keep widening the circle of presumed conspirators.

Though it is true, as some particularists have argued (Hagen, 2018), that CTs are not necessarily “vast” and don’t necessarily postulate “preternaturally smart” conspirators, they have a tendency to end up doing so. The hypothesis that Lee Harvey Oswald acted on somebody’s orders does not necessarily require a vast and complex conspiracy. But to explain why the Warren Commission concluded that there is no evidence for such a plot *does* require a more elaborate conspiracy. And to explain why *that* conspiracy has not been exposed by now requires an even larger one, etc. As researchers have observed, almost every unofficial CT has the tendency to grow larger in scope over time, even if they start out small. As Lewandowsky writes, “contrary evidence merely identifies a growing number of people or institutions that are part of the conspiracy” (Lewandowsky et al., 2015). As a result, in Keeley’s words, “[w]hat began as a small conspiracy … invariably swells into a conspiracy of huge proportions” (Keeley, 1999, p. 57). Since any counterevidence or missing evidence can be explained away within the CT, attempts to refute it often backfire: the more arguments you garner against it, the more its proponents will be impressed by how powerful and devious the conspirators prove to be. As Byford (2011, p. 55) recounts, when the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the most infamous conspiracy document in modern history, was exposed as a forgery concocted in Czarist Russia, “many of the book's admirers simply dismissed the evidence against it as a campaign by Jews to undermine the 'leaked' document which exposes so clearly their sinister secret”. Even academic researchers studying conspiracy theories have been accused of being government shills (Lewandowsky et al., 2015). It is this feature, I believe, which allows us to distinguish legitimate hypotheses about conspiracies from CTs (in the derogatory sense), because it is characteristic of virtually every unofficial CT. In short, any conspiracy hypothesis which requires us to assume conspirators that are preternaturally smart and powerful (as necessitated by the principle of asymmetry) should be rejected as a baseless CT. Note that the force of this probabilistic argument also depends on the political system under which the hypothesis of conspiracy is being investigated. Absence of evidence has stronger evidential force in open and democratic societies, where investigators enjoy freedom of expression and have (relatively) free access to information. In closed and dictatorial societies, absence of missing is obviously less conclusive (see Dentith, 2020 on the “fixation on Western examples”).

This demarcation criterion allows us to separate legitimate hypotheses about conspiracies from unsubstantiated CTs. But it does not show why we should be *prima facie* suspicious of CTs which we have not (yet) properly investigated.

# **Epistemic black holes**

Stephen Law (2011) compared irrational belief systems to “intellectual black holes” into which unwary truth seekers can fall, and from which it may be hard to escape. I believe this metaphor is especially apposite for CTs. Fundamentally, this is because the evasive maneuvers according to which absent evidence is further proof of the conspiracy, and counterevidence has been fabricated by the conspirators, cannot be regarded as *ad hoc*. When we complain that a theoretical move is ad hoc, we are saying that it lacks an independent theoretical justification, and is being deployed with the sole purpose of rescuing the theory or hypothesis from refutation (Bamford, 1993; Boudry, 2013). In the case of CTs, however, this is not the case, since the auxiliary assumptions (“the conspirators could have fabricated this apparent counterevidence”) flow quite naturally from its central assumptions. If we are investigating the hypothesis that duplicitous agents are plotting behind the scenes, it is only natural to expect them to cover up their tracks and even to fabricate evidence. Such a move is hardly ‘ad hoc’, as Keeley has pointed out: “it is not ad hoc to suppose that false and misleading data will be thrown your way when one supposes that there is somebody out there actively throwing the data at you” (Keeley, 2018, p. 429). In the case of most pseudosciences, we can blame stubborn believers for clinging to a research program long after it has ceased to be “progressive” (Clarke, 2002; Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970). But in the case of CTs, the theory itself engenders the kind of evasions and defense mechanisms which we rightly regard as suspicious (XXX). This explains why CTs can exert such a strong attraction, and why the metaphor of an epistemic black hole is apposite. Once you are prepared to ascribe preternatural shrewdness and power to the conspirators in your theory, no possible evidence can shake you out of your conviction.

To feel the gravitational pull of such epistemic black holes, consider the following question: how can CT skeptics be so confident that perfectly executed conspiracies, in which the conspirators flawlessly cover up their every track, are fictitious? By definition, we only know about the conspiracies that have failed, or at least have been exposed after completion. But we don’t know how many conspiracies were pulled off successfully, since we will never hear about those. In this case, my argument based on the principle of asymmetry of causes and effects would be question-begging: I’m already assuming that nobody is intelligent and powerful enough to perpetrate the perfect crime.

In his famous critique of the “conspiracy theory of history”, Karl Popper argues that historical events are dominated by unintended consequences, and that when a conspiracy is attempted, it “never—or ‘hardly ever’—turns out in the way that is intended” (Popper, 1963/2002, p. 166). In other words, there are always mishaps, slip-ups, misunderstandings, unforeseen circumstances. Or are there? What if Popper is simply looking at a biased sample of history, oblivious to all those episodes in which things *did* go exactly according to some nefarious plan? There may be an untold number of genuine conspiracies that will never make it into history textbooks, precisely because they were flawlessly executed. If we try to gauge the likelihood of pulling off a perfect conspiracy by only looking at those instances in which the conspiracy was exposed, our estimate will be severely biased.

Even some academic scholars of CTs have been impressed by this argument, and regard it as a reason to take CTs more seriously (e.g. Basham, 2006). Indeed, once you are lured into this conspiracist mindset, you can even give the known track record of failed conspiracies a conspiratorial twist. Perhaps ‘they’ sometimes willingly allow for minor leaks to happen (such as the Watergate scandal), so that they can lull us into a false sense of security. By spoon-feeding us evidence that suggests that real conspiracies are exposed sooner or later and that it is impossible to keep a secret, they divert our attention away from the bigger scheme of things (see Byford, 2011, p. 154). In his philosophical defense of CTs, Basham argues that, despite all the critical arguments leveled against them by clever philosophers, CTs have emerged as “remarkably wily and resilient epistemic creatures” (Basham, 2006, p. 133). He is quite right: CTs as a class have a remarkable degree of *internal* resilience and resourcefulness. But this is exactly what is so troubling about them. In fact, this extreme resilience leads to two related problems, as I will show in the next sections: (1) CTs are too easy to construct; (2) for any given historical event, multiple and contradictory CTs can be constructed with equal justification. And this, finally, will allow us to explain our *prima facie* suspicion of CTs.

# **A proliferation of CTs**

## **A generic recipe for CTs**

It is impossible to predict what the next major historical event will be. But one thing can already be stated with near-absolute confidence: whatever happens, and whoever (if anyone) is held responsible, the event will soon spark some unofficial CT, a hypothesis which will end up attributing preternatural intelligence and powers to the alleged conspirators. This is because every historical event can be turned into a CT, even the ones whose official version already involves a conspiracy. In order to see this, we can think of the following steps as a ‘recipe’ for generating novel CTs, for any given historical event:

* *The official story*. Take the official version of events accepted by mainstream media, governments, or scientists. Whatever this official version, this is not what actually happened. It is a cover-up invented and disseminated by the conspirators working behind the scenes, to distract the public’s attention from some far more sinister going-ons. By definition, the efforts of the conspirators will always appear ‘successful’, since the view they wanted to impose on the rest of society is exactly the official, mainstream one.
* *Official conspiracies.* If the official version of events already involves a conspiracy (such as 9/11), one just has to invent a higher-order conspiracy, in which the alleged conspiracy accepted in the received view is nothing but a false-flag operation. The designated ‘conspirators’ are never the real conspirators.
* *Refuting the official version*. To attack the official version, focus on any unresolved questions, apparent contradictions or minor gaps in the official narrative. This will not be too difficult. No matter how well-documented, no historical account of any event is ever fully complete. Indeed, the more extensively a historical event has been documented, the more opportunities there will be for finding such suspicious anomalies. From these “errant data”, as Keeley (1999, p. 52) called them, one can derive the conclusion that the official narrative cannot possibly be true, and that something dark and sinister is going on.
* *Who’s behind it?* It suffices to find any party who has benefited in some way from the historical event, or could conceivably have benefited. As major historical events will always happen to benefit someone or another, this step will not be too difficult.
* *Lack of evidence for the conspiracy theory*. As explained, absence of evidence need never be a discouragement. Under the assumption of your CT, missing evidence is precisely what you would expect, since the conspirators have been very scrupulous in covering up their tracks.
* *Evidence against the conspiracy theory.* Any counterevidence can be turned on its head and presented as further corroborating your CT. It is reasonable, after all, to assume that the conspirators will fabricate evidence to shore up the official version and discredit those who might reveal their secrets.
* *Critics.* Any critics of your CT can be accused of being complicit in the plot, of being stooges paid by the conspirators to thwart honest investigations, or of being “sheeple”, gullible dupes of official propaganda.

As should be clear, these are perfectly general steps, which will work regardless of the nature of the historical event and the received account accepted by mainstream media or historians. Even the paradigmatic cases of genuine conspiracies in the historical record can be (and have been) subjected to unofficial CTs. The Watergate scandal, for example, an actual and documented example of a nefarious cover-up that one would think would satisfy conspiracy theorists, has been the subject of higher-order CTs, in which the hidden truth was more sinister still. According to this CT, Nixon was actually innocent and the whole alleged break-in and cover-up had been staged by Nixon’s enemies to remove him from the White House (Brotherton, 2015, p. 65).

## **Radical underdetermination**

The above recipe for making CTs not only allows one to turn every historical event into a CT, but to create *multiple* CTs for any given historical event. In philosophical terms, CTs are radically underdetermined by the available evidence. What this means in practice is that the theoretical parameters of any given CT (the culprits, the plot, the mechanisms) are partly arbitrary, and can easily be substituted for one another. The epistemic structure of a CT works like a protective outer shell, in which (almost) any content can be inserted.

This is not to say that the parameters of a CT are completely arbitrary or unmotivated. For example, in order to identify the conspirators behind the scenes, conspiracy theorists pose the *cui bono* question: who benefited from the course of events? This places some reasonable constraints on the generation of plausible CTs: the theorists need to be able to spin a plausible story in which the alleged culprits stand to gain from what happened. For instance, if you believe that the moon landing was a faked, the most straightforward answer to the *cui bono* question will be NASA or the U.S government. Perhaps NASA wanted a prestige project to attract more funding, or perhaps the Americans just wanted to beat the Soviets to their game and win the Cold War. Psychological or social factors may also place some constraints on the identity of the perpetrators. According to Lipset and Raab (1978), though the perpetrators in a CT are often hidden from view, most culturally successful CTs still have a visible target that can act as a placeholder for the invisible culprits. For instance, though a secret organization like the Elders of Zion is hard to pinpoint, the Jewish community provides a suitable proxy.

Even taking into account these constraints, however, it is still true that, for most historical events, one can imagine multiple answers to the *cui bono* question. As a consequence, communities of CT believers often struggle with internaldisarray. Since it is always possible to come up with a rival CT which posits a different plot with different perpetrators, and which explains the available evidence equally well, it is often hard to settle on any single CT (XXX). A good example is the assassination of JFK. If one rules out the official version that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, then a whole list of potential conspirators could be considered. In a 2013 Gallup poll which showed that a clear majority (61%) of Americans still believe that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone, respondents were asked who was most likely behind the assassination. As it turns out, opinions were divided across a wide array of potential culprits: the Mafia (13%), the Federal government (13%), the CIA (7%), Cuba and Fidel Castro (5%), JFK’s own vice-president Lyndon Johnson (3%), the Soviet Union (3%), the Ku Klux Klan (3%), FBI director J. Edgar Hoover (1%), and various other actors (Swift, 2013). Because of the self-sealing logic of CTs, it is extremely difficult to settle disputes about the identity of the conspirators, or about the nature of the plot. Considering that any of these parties could have successfully covered up their tracks, it is impossible to rule out the involvement of any of them. As a result, there is still no consensus in sight after half a century of conspiracy theorizing.

In documented conspiracies, such as the Watergate scandal, we expect to see the opposite pattern, again because of the principle of asymmetry of causes and effects. Since actually occurring conspiracies radiate outward into the future, leaving a whole spectrum of effects, independent lines of evidence will usually converge on the same hypothesis, and incriminate the same perpetrators. For that reason, the proliferation of multiple and conflicting CTs may be regarded as indirect evidence that an epistemic black hole has opened up around a particular event.

## **The likelihood of ‘observing’ CTs**

Given that it is always possible to construct multiple CTs around any given historical event, and given that conspiratorial explanations of history are psychologically appealing for a number of reasons (Douglas et al., 2019; Uscinski, 2018), we should not be surprised to find that every major historical event will spawn multiple CTs, *even if* no actual conspiracy has occurred. A good example is the template of a ‘false flag’ operation for terrorist attacks. In recent years, every single terrorist attack or mass shooting has been the subject of CTs deploying the false-flag template, often within hours or even minutes after the attack (Stokes, 2018). It is a very safe prediction that the next terrorist attack, whatever the circumstances and whoever the (officially designated) culprit, will immediately prompt one or multiple CTs.

Moreover, because of their warped epistemology and self-sealing logic, CTs can persist in the teeth of any evidence or counterevidence. In his recent defense of particularism, Basham (2018, p. 44/48) assures us that “[P]eople are not long attracted to conspiracy theories *sans* any evidence […] Conspiracy theories that are long lived are most always characterized by interesting, if not always conclusive evidence.” But Basham does not present any evidence for this claim, and indeed it is demonstrably false. For instance, in the absence of any shred of credible evidence that the Twin Towers were brought down by controlled demolition[[5]](#endnote-5), and despite detailed refutations by structural engineers and demolition experts, the 9/11 Truth movement has not petered out, and the ‘controlled demolition’ claim is still one of the core tenets of the movement. Even the belief in the authenticity of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, perhaps the most notorious CT of recent history,is still rampant, a full century after having been exposed as a fraud dating from Czarist Russia (in *The Times* in 1921). To this very day, the *Protocols* are being regularly reprinted and disseminated as an authentic document, especially in the Islamic world.[[6]](#endnote-6)

It is this proliferation and persistence of CTs in the teeth of any evidence, I believe, which explains the derogatory meaning of the phrase “that’s *just* a conspiracy theory”, or the disclaimer of people who want to defend a conspiratorial hypothesis: “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but…” (Husting & Orr, 2007). If we encounter a new conspiratorial hypothesis about a historical event, it is quite likely to be an unfounded CT. This *prima facie* suspicion can be cashed out in Bayesian terms, as follows:

Cx = there is an unacknowledged conspiracy behind event X

CTx = event X gives rise to conspiracy theories

P (Cx|CTx) is the probability that there is an actual unacknowledged conspiracy going on, given that (many) people are alleging a conspiracy, while P (CTx |Cx) is the likelihood that an actual conspiracy will give rise to allegations of conspiracy. Since no historical event is immune from CTs, and some people are psychologically disposed to conspiratorial explanations (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017; Douglas et al., 2019; Uscinski, 2018), the likelihood P (CTx|¬Cx) is very high. In other words, even if there is no actual conspiracy, it is still very likely that there will be persistent allegations of conspiracy. Following Bayes’ formula, P (Cx|CTx) = P (CTx|Cx) P (Cx) / P (CTx). In other words, whatever we think of the prior probability of an actual conspiracy behind event X, the mere fact that there are certain persistent CTs around the event hardly has any probative value. *It always happens.* Moreover, there will typically be multiple and contradictory CTs, implicating different culprits and involving different plots. Those who are inclined to do so will never fail to come up with some CT or another regardless of what actually happened.

Suppose that, in the wake of the next terrorist attack (claimed by either jihadists or right-wing extremists), someone says: “Don’t you see this was just a false flag operation staged by the government with paid actors?” Even before I have considered the evidence for this claim, I am entitled to *prima facie* scepticism, because I know that those who are inclined to do so will always “see” false flag operations regardless of what actually happened, and that such CTs can hold sway in certain circles even in the total absence of any credible evidence. Given all this prior knowledge, and given that we don’t always have time to investigate every bizarre claim that someone throws our way, I think it would be justified to reply: “Well, that’s *just* a conspiracy theory” (XXX).

Of course, like any evaluative concept, “conspiracy theory” is susceptible to abuse. Particularists like Basham, Dentith and others are right to worry that *actual* conspirators may exploit the bad reputation of CTs to brush off any investigation into their nefarious doings. Dentith (2020) recently claimed that the Nixon administration initially brushed off the accusations about the Watergate Affair as “just conspiracy theories”, and although he does not provide actual quotations, we may well take his word for it. But any derogatory term is susceptible to abuse. If phrases like “that’s *just* a conspiracy theory” are wielded to prematurely dismiss legitimate questions about possible conspiracies, we would expect the principle of asymmetry of causes and effects to eventually resolve the matter. The same potential for abuse exists for the derogatory term “conspiracy theory phobia” proposed by some generalists to characterize what they see as an unjustified suspicion of CTs (Basham & Räikkä, 2018). Whether or not their concept has some merit, it should be clear that it too is open to abuse. Someone like David Icke could happily use it to pathologize the widespread skepticism about his infamous CT according to which the world is secretly run by an extraterrestrial race of shape-shifting lizards. But that by itself is no reason to reject the term “conspiracy theory phobia”. To draw one last parallel with the old demarcation problem, the term “pseudoscience” has also been abused by, for instance, Intelligent Design creationist to dismiss Darwinian evolution (e.g. Johnson, 2002). But just because “pseudoscience” has been hijacked by pseudoscientists does now show that it is a useless concept. What it does show is that every concept should be handled with care, and there may be reasonable (or unreasonable) boundary disputes about its proper application.

# **Conclusion**

What is it about “conspiracies theories” that makes the very concept into a term of abuse, hurled around in the public arena to discredit the views of opponents? In this paper, I have argued that an intellectual presumption against conspiracy theories is indeed justified, provided that we distinguish them from legitimate hypotheses about conspiracies. Even though conspiracies abound in the historical record, we would expect to find evidence of such conspiracies as time wears on, because of a deep asymmetry between causes and effects in the historical sciences. This is especially true in open and democratic society with freedom of expression and (relatively) free access to information.

Although there is no crisp line dividing respectable hypotheses about conspiracies from CTs (in the derogatory sense), the same is true with respect to science and pseudoscience. But this does not stop us from applying those terms to prototypical and uncontroversial instances of both kinds. To solve the demarcation problem of CTs, I have proposed a simple rule of thumb: if your conspiracy hypothesis can only be rescued from refutation by making the conspirators preternaturally smart and powerful, you have entered the realm of CTs. What CTs have in common is that they open up an epistemic ‘black hole’. Once you start attributing preternatural foresight, power and intelligence to the alleged conspirators, no possible evidence can shake you out of your conviction. Based on this analysis of CTs as epistemic black holes, I presented a generic recipe for constructing CTs which, I claim, will never fail to work, regardless of the circumstances and the available evidence. Given certain psychological inclinations to conspiracist ideation (which are stronger in some people than in others), we should not be surprised that every major historical event will spawn various CTs, even if the official version already involves a conspiracy.

This account of CTs is a form of generalism because it identifies common epistemic defects underlying CTs and explains why CTs will always proliferate regardlessof the evidence and the actual occurrence of conspiracies. Though this does not justify a blanket dismissal of any hypotheses involving conspiracies, it gives us *prima facie* reasons to be suspicious of unofficial conspiratorial explanations of history, and explains the bad reputation of CTs in the public arena, exemplified by common phrases such like “That’s *just* a conspiracy theory” and “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but…” The intuition behind these everyday phrases is that CTs are often gratuitous and facile, that anyone can dream up such fantastical notions that are conveniently shielded from refutation. Because did you hear that even academic journals are now being infiltrated by Deep State agents posing as real philosophers, in an attempt to shore up all the official lies we’ve been told about 9/11?

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1. See the remarkably heated polemic with Dieguez et al. (2016), sparked by an opinion piece on the “fight” against conspiracy theories published in the French newspaper *Le Monde*: “Luttons efficacement contre les théories du complot”, signed by Gérald Bronner, Véronique Campion-Vincent, Sylvain Delouvée, Sebastian Dieguez, Karen Douglas, Nicolas Gauvrit, Anthony Lantian and Pascal Wagner-Egger (June 5th, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. There are thousands of examples of such disclaimers to be found on Google, as in the title of this talk show episode: “The Illuminati, Not Just a Conspiracy Theory”. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3351236/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. «  Ceci n’est pas un complot », directed by Bernard Crutzen, released on  6 February 2021: www.imdb.com/title/tt14021904/ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For lay people and in everyday life, to be sure, a sociological demarcation line is quite serviceable: the fact that some theories are rejected by the relevant experts is a good reason not to take them seriously (perhaps even the best one available, see Levy, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I would be interested to learn if Basham has a different assessment of the evidence for the ‘controlled demolition’ hypothesis. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Philip Graves (August 16-18, 1921). "The Truth about the Protocols: A Literary Forgery". *The Times*. Archived at [bit.ly/3p1mtfE](https://bit.ly/3p1mtfE). A list of contemporary imprints: bit.ly/3qU7W7a [↑](#endnote-ref-6)