**Like Black Holes in the Sky: The Warped Epistemology of Conspiracy Theories**

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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 conspiracy theories regarded with suspicion? Just like with the traditional demarcation problem (between science and pseudoscience), philosophers disagree about where to draw the line between legitimate hypotheses about conspiracies and unfounded ‘conspiracy theories’. Some believe that there is no such demarcation line to be drawn, that each CT should be evaluated on its own merits, and that the bad reputation of CTs rests on nothing but prejudice. In this paper, I intend to rescue the intuition that there is indeed something *prima facie* suspicious about conspiracy theories. First, I demarcate legitimate theorizing about real-life conspiracies from “mere conspiracy theories” (in the pejorative sense). Along the way, my analysis will clarify some epistemological issues surrounding falsifiability, ad hoc reasoning, and hypotheses involving intentional agents. Because of their extreme resilience to external criticism and counterevidence, I argue, conspiracy theories are the epistemological equivalent of a ‘black hole’, in which unwary truth-seekers are drawn, never to escape again. But this strong attraction of CTs comes at a steep price: their theoretical parameters are essentially arbitrary, making them vulnerable to internal disruption. In essence, because it is so easy to construct a novel CT, it is equally easy to construct many (rival) ones about the same historical event. And that is what justifies our suspicion of CTs.

1. **Introduction**

In polite company, it is frowned upon to admit believing in 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 hefty dose of skepticism, or even to dismiss it out of hand. This negative connotation is widespread. Even the most inveterate conspiracy theorist will usually be annoyed when he is being accused of peddling conspiracy theories. 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 – can and do occur in history. 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 (Coady, 2006; Uscinski, 2018). How should we define a CT? When, if ever, is it rational to believe in CTs, and when should we reject them? Some philosophers have expressed rather strong opinions on the matter. According to Charles Pigden, the idea 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 this paper, however, I feel obliged to defend exactly that “idiotic superstition”. First, to clear the conceptual ground, I look into the definition of both the terms conspiracy and conspiracy theory, drawing analogies with the traditional demarcation problem (sections 2.1-2.2). Next, I try to pinpoint exactly where legitimate theorizing about possible conspiracies ends and where we enter the realm of unfounded CTs (2.3-2.4). Unlike many philosophers, I believe that these reasons have a lot to do with falsifiability, which is discussed in section 3. CTs can be regarded as the epistemic equivalent of a black hole, in which unwary passersby are swallowed up, never to be seen again. I then clarify the role of human agency and *adhocness* in discussions about unfalsifiability (sections 3.1-3.2), taking issue with some previous analyses of CTs. Next, I explain why the real problem with unfalsifiable theories is their essentially arbitrary nature (4.1). In section 4.2, I show how this arbitrariness accounts for the internal volatility of CTs and their lack of theoretical progress. From a sociological point of view, CTs have a tendency to grow in scope, spiral out of control, and spawn multiple variations and offshoots. Finally, by means of a simple recipe, I show that it is remarkably easy to fabricate a novel CT about any given historical event, or indeed to dream up multiple rival CTs about the same event. Because of all these reasons, and despite the fact that some conspiracies are indubitably real, we are justified in regarding CTs – appropriately demarcated – with a very suspicious eye.

1. **Demarcation of conspiracy theories**
   1. Definitions

The most useful and succinct definition of a conspiracy theory (CTs) is due to Brian Keeley (2018, p. 423): “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”. Possibly the only element missing from this definition is that the conspirators in a CT invariably act with nefarious intentions (a surprise party is not a conspiracy). Elaborating on this element, Joe 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”. The first thing to note about such conspiracies is that they are all too real. People occasionally form secret coalitions to achieve certain goals, and often 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. Most government putsches, political assassinations and terrorist attacks, of which there are plenty in the historical record, qualify as “conspiracies” under Uscinski’s definition. If we understand “conspiracy theory” to simply refer to a proper historical account of just such an episode, as per Keeley’s definition, then no sensible person would deny that it is rational to believe some such CTs. But this is not what most people mean when they are using the term CT. Apart from the official CTs you find in history textbooks, there are countless unofficial theories about conspiracies that are not recognized by reputable historians, journalists or other “epistemic authorities” (Levy, 2007). When people use the term CT in its derogatory sense, they mean to disparage this class of unofficial, unrecognized and unsubstantiated theories: for instance the theory that the moon landing was faked, that Lee Harvey Oswald was just a patsy of a larger conspiracy against JFK, and that 9/11 was an inside job carried out by elements in the Bush administration.

* 1. Unofficial status

In an attempt to solve this problem of demarcation, many researchers have baked ‘unofficial-ness’ into the definition of CTs, thus distinguishing them from conspiracies that are acknowledged by mainstream historians and journalists. At a first approximation, this definition indeed captures the difference between genuine conspiracies and unfounded CTs, but for philosophical purposes it is not satisfying. It is instructive in this context to draw a parallel 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, almost no-one has proudly proclaimed to be a “pseudoscientist”. In any event, pseudoscience can also be roughly defined as denoting those theories, activities and cognitive fields that aspire to scientific status, but that are widely rejected by the scientific community. But of course, this is not a genuine solution to the demarcation problem, or else philosophers would have declared victory long ago. A sociological answer to the demarcation problem merely postpones the answer to the question of interest: *why* is it that our epistemic experts give some theories their stamp of approval, while rejecting others as false contenders? Also, could it conceivably happen that those authorities make mistakes? Those who embrace unofficial CTs (or pseudosciences) will argue that such a sociological demarcation criterion begs the question against them. If their main claim is that official authorities are lying to us about some event X, we cannot just dismiss their theory on the grounds that it is rejected by official authorities. In everyday life, to be sure, a sociological distinction is quite serviceable: the fact that some theories are rejected by the relevant experts is a good reason not to believe them (probably even the best one, see Levy, 2007). But the question remains why the relevant experts think so. Are there any general theoretical criteria for adjudicating theories about conspiracies, or should we always judge their merits on a case-by-case basis?

* 1. Positive evidence

As with the traditional demarcation problem, philosophers are divided between particularists and generalists (Keeley, 2018). The former believe that all theories should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and that it is impossible to draw up a list of general criteria for separating the wheat from the chaff (Laudan, 1983). The generalists, by contrast, believe that bad theories (pseudosciences or CTs) tend to suffer from similar general flaws, which allows us to diagnose them at a higher level of abstraction.

I believe that there are indeed some general criteria to tell apart legitimate theorizing about conspiracies from unsubstantiated CTs. A first general criterion has to do with 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 cause ‘radiates’ into the future, leaving multiple and widespread effects, any of which can lead us back to the originating cause (Cleland, 2002). If a historical event has really occurred, we therefore typically find multiple lines of independent evidence attesting to its existence: material evidence, witnesses, records, first-hand accounts, etc. This also applies to conspiracies. Many ‘official’ conspiracies acknowledged by historians and government authorities (e.g. the October Revolution, the 9/11 plot by Al Qaeda) are supported by a wealth of evidence coming from a wide range of different sources (testimonies, records, material evidence…). In the case of the 9/11 plot, for example, not only has every hijacker and accomplice been identified, but every stage of the plot (planning, preparation, execution) has been meticulously documented based on many different sources, which all lead to the same conclusion (Wright, 2006). By contrast, in the case of unofficial CTs, such positive evidence is entirely missing. From a probabilistic point of view, absence of evidence only constitutes evidence of absence when we have prior reasons to expect such evidence (Pigliucci & Boudry, 2014). But this is exactly what the asymmetry of overdetermination provides us with. If we don’t find any positive evidence for a conspiracy, then we are right in rejecting it.

* 1. Explaining absence of evidence

But does the asymmetry of overdetermination really apply here? What if the conspirators have been careful to erase all the ‘effects’ of their conspiracy? This brings us to the defining feature of CTs: they are the only theories that explain the absence of evidence in their favor, and 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, we will therefore not find any positive evidence for the conspiracy. Moreover, CTs give us reason to expect evidence *contradicting* the theory. 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 hypothesis.

In order to accommodate these cases, we have to add a temporal dimension to our demarcation criterion. In the immediate aftermath of a historical event, it is reasonable to speculate about different working hypotheses, including those involving conspiracies, even if at that point we don’t have any positive evidence in their favor. In this early stage of investigation, it is also rational not to be deterred by an apparent absence of evidence for a conspiracy, or even by an apparent refutation of the CT. 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 theories about conspiracies which were initially rejected by epistemic authorities – and indeed were sometimes branded as mere “conspiracy theories” in the pejorative sense – later then ended up becoming part of textbook history (e.g. Watergate scandal, or the Iran-Contra Affair).

As we investigate the event longer and more thoroughly, however, the probability of not finding any positive evidence, under the assumption of a conspiracy, becomes smaller and smaller. Documented incidents of conspiracies in the historical record show that it is very difficult to commit the perfect crime, covering up all your traces. 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.

As you investigate a conspiracy hypothesis longer and more thoroughly, and as you fail to unearth positive evidence or even discover more contrary evidence, your hypothesis can only be rescued from refutation by (1) making the alleged conspirators smarter and more powerful (2) widening the circle of conspirators. For instance, if a certain witness contradicts your hypothesis, you can include that witness into your presumed circle of conspirators. If a scientific investigation finds material evidence refuting your account, you may be forced to conclude either that the evidence has been forged or that the scientists are themselves complicit. If some sceptic attacks your theory, he too must be a government stooge. This is the point where a conspiracy hypothesis strains credulity beyond its breaking point and degenerates into a full-blown CT (in the derogatory sense). Indeed, researchers have observed that unofficial CTs have the tendency to grow ever 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). To sum up, absence of evidence or apparent counterevidence can be condoned at an early stage, by attributing this to the deceptive actions of the conspirators. But this strategy cannot be maintained indefinitely. Any conspiracy hypothesis that can only be rescued from refutation by making the conspirators preternaturally smart and powerful should be rejected as an irrational CT.

* 1. Epistemic black hole

The philosopher Stephen Law (2011) compared irrational belief systems to “intellectual black holes”, in which unwary passersby are swallowed up, and from which it is almost impossible to escape. I believe this metaphor is especially apposite for CTs. Once you start ascribing infinite (or at least preternatural) shrewdness and power to the conspirators, there is no way for you to be shaken out of your conviction. Because counterevidence can always be deflected, attempts to refute a CTs often backfire: the more evidence you garner against it, the more its proponents will be impressed by the power and deviousness the conspirators are. 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). Such all-encompassing conspiracy theories have an internal coherence and consistency that is lacking in the vicissitudes of real-life. Everything works exactly according to plan, every anomaly can be explained away, and the plot is perfectly foolproof. As Richard Hofstadter already remarked in his classic 1964 essay *The paranoid style in American politics*: “the paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities. It is, if not wholly rational, at least intensely rationalistic” (Hofstadter, 2012, p. 36).

To feel the gravitational pull of such epistemic black holes, consider the following question: how can we be so confident that perfectly executed conspiracies, in which the conspirators flawlessly cover up their every track, do not exist? 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. This introduces an obvious selection effect. If we estimate the likelihood of pulling off a perfect conspiracy by only looking at those instances where the conspiracy was exposed, our estimate will be severely biased. There may be an untold number of genuine conspiracies that will never make it into history textbooks, precisely because they were executed flawlessly. In *Conjectures and Refutations*,Karl Popper (1963/2002) writes that historical events are dominated by unintended consequences, and that things seldom go exactly according to plan. 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? Popper may be looking at a biased sample of history, glossing over all those episodes in which things *did* go exactly according to plan.Even some academic researchers into CTs have been impressed by this argument, and regard it as a reason to take CTs more seriously (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 ‘every conspiracy is 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). So again, how can we rule out such perfect conspiracies?

1. **Unfalsifiability**
   1. The role of intentional agency

Famously, according to Popper (2012), the hallmark of scientific theories is their falsifiability. If a theory is compatible with every conceivable observation, and hence there is no way to refute it, then it cannot be scientific. Not surprisingly, therefore, Popper has regarded conspiracy theories with suspicion. In *The Open Society and his Enemies*, he developed a broad critique of conspiracy thinking, decrying what he calls the “conspiracy theory of history”. According to this view, human intentionality is the major driver of historical events: things happen because someone intended them to happen. In recent years, however, a number of philosophers have taken issue with Popper’s critique, and have denied that unfalsifiability is or should be the main reason for our default presumption against conspiracy theories (Basham, 2006; Byford, 2011; Clarke, 2002; Keeley, 1999, 2018).

According to one line of criticism, falsifiability may well be essential in the natural sciences, but it is not an appropriate criterion when intelligent agents are involved. Unlike atoms and quarks and DNA, human agents may actively seek to escape detection. Notably, Keeley has recently argued that

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. […] unfalsifiability is only a reasonable criterion in cases where we do not have reason to believe that there are powerful agents seeking to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter. (2018, p. 429)

In other words, it is only natural, for a CT to be hard to falsify (Basham, 2006). If there are really intelligent agents with nefarious intentions working behind the scenes, as CTs suppose, it is not ad hoc to suppose that some evidence has been fabricated to throw us off the scent.

I believe this objection is misguided. To be sure, if we assume we are dealing with duplicitous agents working behind the scenes, we should indeed expect some measure of unfalsifiability. But just because a theory provides an internal explanation for its own unfalsifiability does not mean that this unfalsifiability is thereby condoned. Indeed, I believe the opposite is true. According to some young-earth creationists, the apparent fossil evidence for evolution was actually fabricated by the devil to lure us into skepticism and unbelief (Ham & Cardno, 1987; Morris, 1963). This theory, too, contains an explanation of its own unfalsifiability, namely that the devil wants to deceive us about the truth of the Bible, and possibly also about his own existence, an idea encapsulated in a quote by Charles Baudelaire: “The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Keeley’s argument would apply here as well. If a powerful supernatural creature like the devil were to exist, we would expect him to behave in such a fashion. It is not *ad hoc* to assume that the devil, being the devil, wants to deceive us. This is just an intrinsic part of the hypothesis being investigated. But of course, this does not make the creationist theory of fossils any less preposterous. If anything, because it is *intrinsically* unfalsifiable, it is even more suspicious. Naturally, Keeley may object, we have independent evidence for the existence of human intelligent agents, not of supernatural ones like the devil. But the overall existence of any type of intelligent agent is not what is at stake here: the question in both cases is whether *in this instance* there is “somebody out there” working behind the scenes to thwart our investigation (besides, some conspiracy theorists believe in shape-shifting lizards or other non-human creatures with supernatural abilities). If there is such an intelligent agent, then we have reason to suppose that our hypothesis will be hard to falsify. And to the extent that we assume this “somebody” to be both clever and powerful, our problem of falsifiability will only grow larger.

* 1. Adhocness and the theory-in-itself

In direct contradiction to the above line of reasoning, other critics have argued that the charge of unfalsifiability doesn’t stick because it conflates the theory-as-such with the behavior of its defenders. According to this argument, CTs are not unfalsifiable per se, it’s just that they are sometimes shielded from falsification by overzealous defenders. For example, according to Clarke (2002, p. 141), the fact that conspiracy theorists tend to widen the group of conspirators when they are confronted with counterevidence “is an observation about the fallacious reasoning patterns of some contemporary conspiracy theorists and is simply not relevant to the epistemic evaluation of [CTs] as a class” . In other words, just because some conspiracy theorists refuse to give up their CT does not impugn CTs in general. The trouble, I believe, is that there is no clear line to draw between the theory-as-such and the maneuvers of its defenders, a phenomenon that has been observed in the domain of pseudoscience as well (Cioffi, 1998; Gellner, 1985, p. 142). In many cases, what looks like at attempt to evade falsification may be seen, with equal justification, as a logical extension of the theory-in-itself (Boudry & Braeckman, 2011). Again, if the idea is that duplicitous agents are plotting behind the scenes, we would expect them to cover up their tracks and even to fabricate evidence. What makes CTs so attractive is precisely what makes them epistemically suspect. As soon as you embrace the central premise of a large and powerful conspiracy, then all sorts of immunizing strategies present themselves to you. In his philosophical defense of CTs, Lee Basham has claimed that, despite all the critical arguments developed by philosophers, CTS have emerged as “remarkably wily and resilient epistemic creatures” (Basham, 2006, p. 133). Quite true, but this extreme resilience to criticism is exactly what should make us very suspicious of CTs. One could, with equal justification, praise Henry Morris’s satanic theory of fossil evidence for its “resilience and wiliness”.

1. **The arbitrariness of conspiracy theories**
   1. Constraints and free parameters

To the question ‘How can we rule out a conspiracy that is so airtight that we will never find any evidence for it?’, our answer should be: ‘We can’t.’ The same answer should be given to Morris’s hypothesis that all the evidence for evolution has been fabricated by the devil. But evading falsification comes at a price, and exposes a major weakness of CTs. The real trouble with intrinsically unfalsifiable hypotheses, which I believe is not sufficiently appreciated, is their arbitrariness. In the case of the fossil evidence for evolution, this is fairly obvious. If you want to go down that road, why stop there? First, why Satan rather than someone else? According to the Omphalos hypothesis by 19th-century theologian Philip Gosse, it was God himself who gave the world a perfect appearance of old age when he created it, including fossil remains of animals that never existed. Both hypotheses are perfectly unfalsifiable, and there is no rationally compelling reason to choose one over the other. Second, why assume that the world is really 6.000 years old, as young-earth creationists believe, as opposed to 600 years or 6 million? That parameter in the hypothesis is also perfectly arbitrary as well. As Bertrand Russell (1921) remarked, one could as well claim that the world was created five minutes ago, including all the neurological traces of pseudo-memories of earlier events that never happened.

CTs suffer from the same problem. Because of their intrinsic unfalsifiability, the theoretical parameters of any given CT (the culprits, the plot, the mechanisms) are almost entirely arbitrary, and can easily be substituted for one another. In the absence of any constraints from reality, it’s relatively easy to change a CT’s inner content, while leaving its epistemic protection shield intact. All these rival theories will be equally unfalsifiable and will have an equally decent explanation of their own unfalsifiability. As a result, though CTs have little to fear from attacks by outsiders, in view of the ample immunizing strategies at their disposal, they have much to fear from *internal* dissent. Because the details of any truly unfalsifiable CT are mostly arbitrary, anyone can always come up with a rival theory that reveals a different plot with different perpetrators.

For example, identifying the conspirators depends on answering the *cui bono* question: who benefited from the course of events? For many historical events, there may be many different actors who could conceivably thought to have benefited from its occurrence.[[2]](#footnote-2) If Lee Harvey Oswald did not murder JFK (or did not act alone), then who was really behind the murder? It could be any political opponent of JFK, or his own vice-president, or any foreign power, or the Freemasons or anyone who didn’t like the fact that JFK was a Roman Catholic. Or indeed, as in David Icke’s worldview, why not extraterrestrial shape-shifting alien lizards who are bent on world domination and wanted to get rid of Kennedy for some reason or another? The possibilities are endless. Assuming that any of these parties was involved in the conspiracy and managed to perfectly cover up their tracks, any rival hypothesis is as good as the next one. And with a bit of creativity, hints or clues for the involvement of any of those perpetrators can be found.

If the alleged “benefit” resulting from the event leaves sufficient room for interpretation, different answers to the *cui bono* question may even pull in opposite directions of the political spectrum. For instance, according to right-wing conspiracy theorists, the scientific consensus about global warming, as outlined in the consecutive reports by the IPCC is nothing but a hoax fabricated by left-wing environmentalists to destroy free-market capitalism. But if you listen to some of those very same accused environmentalists, they will tell you that the IPCC has in fact the opposite political agenda, and is conspiring to suppress evidence of the severity of climate change, in order to serve fossil-fuel interest groups (Douglas & Sutton, 2015).

* 1. Internecine quarrels and agnosticism

From a sociological point of view, this arbitrariness is a challenge for CT communities. Because there is no rational way to settle a dispute between two competing CTs about the same event (as both are equally unfalsifiable and arbitrary), it is very hard to achieve any sort of theoretical progress, and to avoid ending up with a panoply of contradicting CTs. How to find a single CT that everyone can agree on? And even if that could be achieved, how to protect if from future challenges from within? Someone can always be tempted to come up with his or her own alternative version of events. As a partial remedy to this internal instability, many conspiracy theorists have begun to shy away from giving a positive account of what actually happened, or even who exactly was involved. By giving up on the hope of achieving consensus, or postponing it until a mater moment, conspiracy theorists can rally around what they all agree on: the deceitfulness of the official story. This explains why many contemporary CTs are not so much full-fledged theories as a series of open-ended questions with answers that are perpetually under construction (see e.g. Griffin, 2008).

The CTs around 9/11 provide a good example. Despite more than 18 years of diligent truth-seeking, conspiracy theorists still can’t agree about who exactly was behind 9/11, what exactly made the buildings collapse, or indeed, whether any planes were used in the first place (some suspect that they were missiles or holograms of some sort). In fact, there is only one thing all 9+11 Truthers can agree on: the official version of events is most definitely a lie which ‘they’ want us to believe. This agnosticism, as Wood et al. (2012) have argued, arguably also explains the puzzling finding that people accord credence to mutually inconsistent CTs. For instance, they found that survey respondents assent both to the theory that Osama bin Laden was already dead when the Americans raided his compound in Abbottabad, *and* that Osama is still alive. Though it initially seems bizarre that people can hold two contradictory beliefs, the finding makes more sense if you start out from a negative premise: what ‘they’ want us to believe is false. What exactly they are lying about, and even who ‘they’ are, may be up for debate later. In this particular case, CT believers may be uncertain about what exactly happened in Abbottabad, but they are quite sure about what did *not* happen. As Wood et al. put it: “any conspiracy theory that stands in opposition to the official narrative will gain some degree of endorsement from someone who holds a conspiracist worldview, even if it directly contradicts other conspiracy theories that they also find credible” (Wood et al., 2012, p. 768).

* 1. *A generic recipe for making CTs*

There is another way of looking at the essentially arbitrary nature of CTs. Not only is it possible, for any given CT, to construct multiple rival theories that are equally unfalsifiable, but I believe that literally *every* major historical event can be turned into a CT. The generic recipe goes as follows:

* *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 our attention away from some far more sinister going-ons. By definition, the efforts of the conspirators will appear ‘successful’, since the view they wanted to impose on the rest of society is exactly the official, mainstream one.
* *Refuting the official version*. Try to find any such unresolved questions, apparent contradictions, or minor gaps in the official narrative. No matter how well-documented, no historical account of any event is ever fully complete. Indeed, the more extensive 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, draw 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 too difficult.
* *Lack of evidence for the conspiracy theory*. As explained, absence of evidence need never discourage you. Under the assumption of your CT, a lack of evidence is precisely what you would expect. 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 substantiating 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 the plot, of being stooges paid by the conspirators to thwart investigations by honest truth-seekers, or of just being “sheeple”, gullible dupes of official propaganda.

I believe all of these are perfectly general stratagems, which can be employed regardless of the nature of the historical event and the official version. This means that no historical event is immune to the fabrication of a CT, not even the ones whose official accounts already involves a conspiracy, such as 9/11. In that case, one just has to invent a higher-order conspiracy, in which the alleged ‘conspiracy’ mentioned in the official version is nothing but a false-flag operation.

1. **Conclusion**

What is it about “conspiracies theories” that makes the very name into a term of abuse, hurled around in political debates and elsewhere? 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 the pages of history are littered with conspiracies, we would expect to find evidence of such conspiracies when they are thoroughly investigated, because of a deep asymmetry between causes and effects in the historical sciences. It is surprisingly easy, however, to fabricate theories about non-existent conspiracies even in the total absence of positive evidence. From an epistemological point of view, such CTs without evidence are curious beasts. They are the only theories that can account for an absence of evidence in their favor, and even the presence of clear counterevidence. Because of their psychological attractiveness and resistance to refutations and criticism, CTs can be seen as the epistemological equivalent of black holes. But their main strength comes with a critical weakness: because it is so easy to construct a CT, it is also easy to construct many rival CTs, which are all equally impervious to critical attacks. This makes CT communities extremely liable to internal disruption, and prevents any form of meaningful progress. As we saw, this arbitrariness is also the main reason justifying our intellectual presumption against CTs. Unless we have some direct positive evidence for a conspiracy hypothesis (or unless we are still at an early stage of investigation) there is no reason to take CTs seriously. In my view, explains the “just” in the colloquial phrase “That’s *just* a conspiracy theory”. The intuition behind this “just” is that CTs are too facile and cheap, and that anyone can dream up such an unfalsifiable “theory”. Because did you hear that even philosophy journals are now infiltrated by Deep State agents trying to shore up all the official lies we’ve been told?

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1. The quotes comes from an article in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1864, but variations have been attributed to various other writers. <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2018/03/20/devil/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For many historical events, of course, some answers to the *cui bono* question will be more natural and straightforward than others. For instance, if you believe that the moon landing was a hoax, the most logical answer to the *cui bono* question will be NASA or the American government. Perhaps NASA wanted more funding, and of course the U.S. wanted to beat the Soviets to their game and win the Cold War. But even here, apart from NASA, many other organizations or entities may have been involved (even the Soviets themselves), for many different purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)