

Conspiracy Theories



Quassim Cassam

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Conspiracy Theories

Quassim Cassam

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First published in 2019 by Polity Press Polity Press

65 Bridge Street

Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press

101 Station Landing

Suite 300

Medford, MA 02155, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3582-8

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3583-5(pb) A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Cassam, Quassim, author.

Title: Conspiracy theories / Quassim Cassam.

Description: Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA : Polity Press, [2019] | Series: Think

Identifiers: LCCN 2019008492 (print) | LCCN 2019010406 (ebook) | ISBN

9781509535842 (Epub) | ISBN 9781509535828 (hardback) | ISBN

9781509535835 (pbk.) Subjects: LCSH: Conspiracy theories.

Classification: LCC HV6275 (ebook) | LCC HV6275 .C36 2019 (print) | DDC 001.9--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019008492>

Typeset in 11 on 15 Sabon

by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk, NR21 8NL

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Preface

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

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

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

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

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

I thank Pascal Porcheron for persuading to me write this book and for very helpful comments on earlier drafts. I also thank Naomi Eilan and Deborah Gbate for many other helpful comments and discussions.

1

The (Real) Point of Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theorists get a seriously bad press. Gullible, irresponsible, paranoid, stupid. These are some of the politer labels applied to them, usually by establishment figures who aren't averse to promoting their own conspiracy theories when it suits them. President George W. Bush denounced outrageous conspiracy theories about 9/11 while his own administration was busy promoting the outrageous conspiracy theory that Iraq was behind 9/11, in cahoots with Al Qaeda.

If the abuse isn't bad enough, conspiracy theorists now have the dubious privilege of being studied by psychologists. The psychology of conspiracy theories is a thing, and the news for conspiracy theorists isn't good. A recent study describes their theories as corrosive to societal and individual well-being.¹ Conspiracy theorists, the study reveals, are more likely to be male, unmarried, and less educated, to have lower household incomes, and to see themselves as being of low social standing. They have lower levels of physical and psychological well-being and are more likely to meet the criteria for having a psychiatric disorder.

In case you're starting to feel sorry for conspiracy theorists (or for yourself, if you are one), perhaps it's worth remembering that they aren't exactly shrinking violets. They are vociferous defenders of their theories and scornful of their opponents. Anyone who has been on the receiving end of the wrath of conspiracy theorists will know that it can be a bruising experience. I have the honour of

being described by one eminent (if that's the right word) conspiracy theorist and fellow philosopher as a 'bona fide anti-conspiracy buffoon'.²

And yet, on reflection, you might wonder what all the fuss is about. After all, if a conspiracy theorist is someone who believes in the existence of some conspiracies, then surely in that sense we are *all* conspiracy theorists. History is full of well-documented conspiracies and one would have to be remarkably ignorant not to realise that. Michael Moore once said that he wasn't into conspiracy theories 'except the ones that are true'.³ Realistically, isn't that actually the position we're all in? Surely what we should be debating is not whether there is anything wrong with conspiracy theories per se, but whether there is anything wrong with specific conspiracy theories.

According to the 9/11 conspiracy theorist James Fetzer (that's the guy who thinks I'm an anti-conspiracy buffoon), for something to qualify as a 'conspiracy', it only requires two or more people who collaborate to perpetrate an illegal act. There are a couple of important things missing from this definition: conspiracies are supposed to be *secret* and, because of that, they involve a *small* group of people - the conspirators. A conspiracy requires a small group of conspirators who work together in secret to do something illegal or harmful.

This is the sense of 'conspiracy' according to which history has always been full of conspiracies. Suppose that a conspiracy *theory* is defined as a theory about a conspiracy. In that case, history books are full of conspiracy theories. They tell us, for example, that Guy Fawkes and his colleagues plotted to blow up the English parliament in 1605. The plot was a conspiracy by Fetzer's definition and mine, and historical accounts of the plot are therefore conspiracy theories.

You don't have to go back to 1605 for examples of conspiracy theories. There are lots of conspiracy theories about 9/11, the attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 - and I don't just mean theories to the effect that the Bush administration or Iraq was behind them. By the definition of 'conspiracy theory' I've just given, the official account of 9/11, as set out in the official report of the 9/11 Commission, is also a conspiracy theory. That account says that the 9/11 attacks were carried out by nineteen Al Qaeda operatives who collaborated in secret to do something immensely harmful to the United States government and to thousands of its citizens. That's a conspiracy in anyone's money.

So it seems that, if you believe the official account of 9/11, then you're a conspiracy theorist. And if you don't believe the official account, you're still a conspiracy theorist. Either way you're a conspiracy theorist; and pretty much everyone else is one too. In that case, how can there be a debate about whether one should be a conspiracy theorist, that is, believe that conspiracies happen?

What's more, if many conspiracy theories are true, then how can it possibly be corrosive to societal and individual well-being to be a conspiracy theorist, to believe that some conspiracy theories are true? If we are *all* conspiracy theorists, then it doesn't make sense to say that conspiracy theorists are less educated (than whom?) or more likely to meet the criteria for having a psychiatric disorder. That would be absurd, and the 'psychology of conspiracy theories' is starting to look like a total waste of time.

But here's the thing: when people argue about conspiracy theories, they aren't arguing about whether individuals have ever collaborated in secret to perpetrate illegal acts. The conspiracy theories that people actually argue about are different from ordinary tales of conspiracy. In the

ordinary sense of 'conspiracy theory', the official account of 9/11 isn't a conspiracy theory. The theory that 9/11 was an inside job is. The theory that in 1605 Guy Fawkes and others conspired to blow up the English parliament in the Gunpowder Plot isn't a conspiracy theory. The theory that the Holocaust is a myth concocted to serve Jewish interests is.

So what's the difference? As it happens, there is a sound rationale for being selective in applying the label 'conspiracy theory'. As conspiracy theory expert Rob Brotherton points out, 'when people call something a conspiracy theory, they're usually not talking about just any old conspiracy'.⁴ Conspiracy theories in the ordinary sense are extraordinary. They have a bunch of special features that make them different from accounts of conspiracies like the Gunpowder Plot.

To avoid confusion, I'll call these extraordinary theories 'Conspiracy Theories' with a capital C and a capital T. A Conspiracy Theory isn't just a theory about a conspiracy. There is more to it than that. A Conspiracy Theorist, again with a capital C and a capital T, is a person who is 'into' Conspiracy Theories, that is, unusually fascinated by them and more willing than most to believe them. We are all conspiracy theorists - we all believe that people sometimes get together in secret to do bad things - but we aren't all Conspiracy Theorists.

I don't have a problem with conspiracy theories but I do have a problem with many Conspiracy Theories. Here's one problem: given the features that make them special, they're unlikely to be true. Conspiracy Theories are implausible by design. Sometimes implausible theories turn out to be true, but it isn't usually sensible to *believe* that they are true. So it isn't usually sensible to be a Conspiracy Theorist. It's no defence to point out that history books are full of tales of

conspiracy because, for the most part, these tales aren't Conspiracy Theories in the special sense that I'm talking about.

If Conspiracy Theories are unlikely to be true and some of them - such as the theory that the Holocaust is a myth - have been conclusively refuted, then what's their point? What purpose do Conspiracy Theories serve, if not to tell the truth? And why do people continue to peddle Conspiracy Theories that have virtually no chance of being true? *Because Conspiracy Theories are first and foremost forms of political propaganda.* They are political gambits whose real function is to promote a political agenda. They aren't 'just theories' like any other.

Which political agenda? Sometimes it's not that obvious, but there are lots of examples of Conspiracy Theories whose political agenda you don't have to be a genius to work out. For example, the point of Conspiracy Theories about the Holocaust is to advance the cause of right-wing anti-Semitism. What these theories are about is exonerating the Nazis and portraying 'the Jews' in as negative a light as possible.

Here's another example, from recent history. Back in 2012 Adam Lanza murdered twenty students and six members of staff at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. It wasn't long before Conspiracy Theorists started to claim that the whole episode was an elaborate hoax by the government, a classic false flag operation in which no one died. Why would the government want to do such a thing? To push the case for gun control.

If that sounds like a reasonable thing to believe, then the following is no less reasonable: Lanza really did shoot twenty-six people at Sandy Hook, and that was a potential problem for the gun lobby. What better way to pre-empt calls for tighter gun control in the wake of a mass shooting

at an elementary school than to claim that the shooting never happened? Take the original Conspiracy Theory, reverse-engineer it, and now it all makes sense: the Sandy Hook conspiracy theory is a blatant piece of political propaganda designed to divert attention from the real problem: the absence of effective gun control in the United States.

This sounds like a conspiracy theory (or should that be Conspiracy Theory?) about Conspiracy Theories: Conspiracy Theories are part of a conspiracy to advance right-wing political causes. But if my theory is a conspiracy theory, then Conspiracy Theorists shouldn't have a problem with it. There are conspiracy theories about just about everything, so why not conspiracy theories about conspiracy theories and the people who advertise them?

The truth is even more complicated. Saying that Conspiracy Theories about Sandy Hook and other such events are pieces of political propaganda makes it sound as though the peddling of such theories is a conscious and deliberate strategy designed to advance a political cause, the implication being that Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theorists are deliberately spreading what they know to be falsehoods in order to manipulate public opinion.

Even if that implication is true, it's still not a Conspiracy Theory unless the people who manipulate public opinion by spreading falsehoods are working together. I haven't said anything about that. For all I've said, the spreading of Conspiracy Theories could be the work of individual conspiracy entrepreneurs who happen to have the same political objective. If these conspiracy entrepreneurs aren't collaborating, then by definition there is no conspiracy. But there's also a subtler reason for not going for a straightforward conspiracy theory about Conspiracy Theories.

The subtler reason is that a claim can be propaganda even if the people making it believe that it's true. Imagine a hypothetical Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theorist who really believes that the whole thing was a false flag operation by the government. He really believes his own propaganda, but that doesn't mean that it isn't propaganda. As the philosopher Jason Stanley points out in his book *How Propaganda Works*, propaganda can be sincere. Hitler's claims about the Jews were propaganda despite being sincere.⁵

In what sense are sincerely believed Conspiracy Theories propaganda? Think again about the idea that Conspiracy Theories are political gambits whose real function is to promote a political agenda. This is a technical use of 'function' that an analogy might help to make a bit clearer. Take an organ like the heart. If someone wants to know what the heart is, then a good way to explain it is to say that the heart is the organ responsible for pumping blood. That is its *function* or *purpose*. You explain what the thing is by explaining what it does, what it's for.

The same goes for Conspiracy Theories. The way to understand what they are is to understand what they are for, to grasp their basic function. Their basic function is to advance a political or ideological objective, be it opposition to gun control, anti-Semitism, hostility to the federal government or whatever. Conspiracy Theories advance a political objective in a special way: by advancing seductive explanations of major events that, objectively speaking, are unlikely to be true but *are* likely to influence public opinion in the preferred direction.

However, there is no need to assume that Conspiracy Theorists don't believe their own theories. The deluded Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theorist who sincerely believes that the whole thing was a hoax will be no less effective at

getting the anti-gun control message across than an insincere proponent of the same view. Indeed, he might be *more* effective because he actually believes what he is saying. But the sincerity of the person who believes his own Conspiracy Theory doesn't mean that what he says isn't propaganda. Whatever his intentions, the actual function of his theory is to promote a political agenda by spreading what is in fact (whether he realises it or not) a bunch of seductive falsehoods.

When people think about propaganda, they usually have in mind the conscious and deliberate manipulation of public opinion by the spreading of falsehoods ('fake news'), half-truths or misleading images and stories. There *are* Conspiracy Theories that are propaganda in that sense - theories that deny the reality of the Holocaust are a case in point - but not all propaganda is like that and not all Conspiracy Theories are like that. There is also the unwitting propaganda of the deluded but sincere Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theorist (if such a person exists). What is or isn't propaganda isn't determined just by the intentions of the people who spread it. It is the fact that what they are spreading *is* fake news, together with the actual ideological associations and political implications of their stories and theories, that makes it propaganda.

Clearly there are Conspiracy Theories that have little or no political content. Perhaps theories about the death of Elvis are like that. To call them political propaganda would be silly. But that's not to deny that many of the most widely discussed Conspiracy Theories are overtly or covertly political. Even Conspiracy Theories about the moon landings are political. If the landings were faked, then who faked them? The government, presumably, or agents of the deep state, the Conspiracy Theorists' favourite multipurpose villain. Yet the minute one starts to talk about the secret, nefarious activities of the government or its

agents, one is in the realm of politics and political propaganda. In the world of Conspiracy Theories politics is virtually inescapable.

The politics of many Conspiracy Theories is right-wing. When you look back at the history of Conspiracy Theories from the eighteenth century on, you can't fail to be struck by the extent to which they are underpinned by right-wing anti-Semitism. In one of the best books on the subject Jovan Byford comments that, 'for a substantial portion of its history, the conspiracy tradition was dominated by the idea of a Jewish plot to take over the world'.⁶ Of course Conspiracy Theories don't have to be anti-Semitic. Nevertheless, it's striking how often in the world of Conspiracy Theories 'the Jews' are identified as the conspirators, either explicitly or in code.

There's no better example of a right-wing anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theory than the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious forgery that was first published in 1903. The *Protocols* supposedly describe a secret meeting at which a member of a group of Jewish elders outlines a fiendish plot for world domination. The full story of the text of the *Protocols* is told by the historian Norman Cohn.⁷ Cohn describes how the alleged protocols were used to justify the massacres of Jews during the Russian Civil War and became an integral part of Nazi ideology. Quoted approvingly by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, they helped to prepare the way for the Holocaust, at least according to Cohn.

Conspiracy Theories are as popular with the extreme left as they are with the extreme right. Hitler was a Conspiracy Theorist; but so was Stalin. Political extremism of one sort or another is the lifeblood of modern Conspiracy Theories. Right-wing theories target Jews, non-existent secret societies such as the Illuminati, and international

organisations such as the United Nations and the Bilderberg Group. Left-wing theories tend to be anti-capitalist and anti-American. Some are anti-Semitic. Left and right are also in agreement about some other things, such as (in the US context) the evils of the federal government and its agencies. That is one of the core themes of 9/11 Conspiracy Theories, which are as popular on the left as they are on the right.

Conspiracy Theories about the assassination of President Kennedy start to make more sense when viewed through the lens of practical politics and propaganda. Kennedy's lone assassin was Lee Harvey Oswald. Once memorably described as the 'loser's loser', Oswald was a self-proclaimed pro-Castro communist who had emigrated to the Soviet Union and tried to murder the right-wing politician Edwin Walker.⁸ Yet after Oswald's own murder at the hands of night-club owner Jack Ruby elements on the left of American politics tried to shift the blame for the Kennedy assassination away from him and onto the deep state, the Mafia, or an unholy alliance of the two. In the same way, figures on the left and on the right have both found it convenient to shift the blame for 9/11 away from Al Qaeda and onto the Bush administration.

Conspiracy Theorists will no doubt claim that my description of their theories as political propaganda is itself political propaganda. It's one thing to accuse Conspiracy Theories of being political propaganda if they are unlikely to be true, but why assume that Conspiracy Theories are unlikely to be true? Isn't the theory that Conspiracy Theories are fake news itself a blatant example of fake news designed to silence political dissents?

The assumption that Conspiracy Theories are unlikely to be true can be justified by taking a closer look at what makes them special. Theories about conspiracies can be true, and

many are, but the special features of Conspiracy Theories don't do much for their chances of getting things right. Once you give up on the idea that Conspiracy Theories are there to tell the truth, there has to be another explanation of what they are up to.

One special feature of Conspiracy Theories that makes them different from other accounts of conspiracies is that they are *speculative*. By 'speculative' I mean that they are based on conjecture rather than knowledge, educated (or not so educated) guesswork rather than solid evidence. After all, if a conspiracy has been successful, then it won't have left behind evidence of a conspiracy. So the only way to uncover a conspiracy is by focusing on odd clues or anomalies that give the game away. Even clever conspirators make mistakes. Some things don't quite fit, and that is the Conspiracy Theorist's best hope. It's all about connecting the dots.

The best way to get a handle on the speculative nature of Conspiracy Theories is to do a comparison with a non-speculative theory about a conspiracy. A nice example is Operation Northwoods, as described by James Bamford.⁹ It's an amazing but true story and an object lesson in the skulduggery of governments and their agencies.

Operation Northwoods was the code name of an operation dreamt up in 1962 by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Lyman Lemnitzer. Lemnitzer, a rabidly right-wing Castro hater, wanted to give the Kennedy administration a pretext for invading Cuba. The pretext was to be a classic false flag operation: a series of terrorist attacks on the US mainland that would be blamed on Cuba. The phony evidence of Cuban involvement would give the general and his cronies in the military the excuse they needed to attack Cuba.

Lemnitzer's plan was never acted on and only came to light in 1997, when a memo describing the operation was made public by the John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Review Board. The document is now available on the National Security Archive and is well worth a read if you've never come across it.¹⁰ Even after all these years it has the power to shock. But it does answer what would otherwise be an obvious question: how do we know that Operation Northwoods was ever planned? We know it was planned because the plans are there in black and white.

The story of Operation Northwoods is the story of a conspiracy and it's not in serious dispute that the story is genuine. Given that the story has the backing of unambiguous documentary evidence, it isn't speculative; it isn't a matter of *conjecture* what Lemnitzer was up to. There are no dots to connect; they're already connected in publicly available documents. And that's the difference between the story of Operation Northwoods and a Conspiracy Theory. There is nothing like the Northwoods memo to prove that 9/11 was an inside job, or that Oswald didn't kill Kennedy unassisted, or that Sandy Hook was a false flag operation. The story of Operation Northwoods isn't a Conspiracy Theory; it's conspiracy fact. Genuine Conspiracy Theories are speculative in a way that Bamford's account of Operation Northwoods is not. That's why they are *theories*.

The view that Conspiracy Theories are speculative is sometimes expressed by saying that they may or may not be true; they have 'not yet been proven'.¹¹ But saying that Conspiracy Theories have not yet been proven is risky. It implies that they *could* yet be proven, but that can't be right if some Conspiracy Theories have already been disproved. The theory that the Holocaust was a myth is one that has been disproved about as conclusively as any theory could be. It's not a theory that 'may or may not be true'. So

‘speculative’ as I understand it is compatible with ‘already disproved’.

Another key feature of Conspiracy Theories is that they are, as Rob Brotherton describes them, ‘contrarian by nature’.¹² There’s more than one way for that to be true. One way is to be contrary to the official view if there is one. The most well-known Conspiracy Theories are contrarian in this sense. They see the official view as part of the establishment’s attempt to cover up the very conspiracy that the Conspiracy Theorist is trying to expose. If ‘contrarian’ means contrary to the official view then it’s hard to imagine anything more contrarian than the theory that 9/11 was an inside job.

A complication is that governments themselves often peddle theories about conspiracies. President Bush’s insistence that Iraq was involved in 9/11 is a good example of that, so why not call his theory a Conspiracy Theory even if it *was* the official view rather than one contrary to it? If Conspiracy Theories can be officially sanctioned, then they aren’t necessarily contrarian. It seems arbitrary to deny that a theory about a conspiracy is a Conspiracy Theory simply because the government is behind it.

But there’s a different sense in which Conspiracy Theories *are* always contrarian. The thing that Conspiracy Theories are contrary to is *appearances* or the *obvious* explanation of events. The whole point of a false flag operation is to do one thing while making it appear that something else happened. So the starting point of a Conspiracy Theory is that things aren’t as they seem. The government agents who supposedly brought down the twin towers on 9/11 wouldn’t have done a very good job if they hadn’t made it look like Al Qaeda did it. So blaming 9/11 on the government is tantamount to saying that there is a

fundamental mismatch between how things look and how they are.

Why are Conspiracy Theorists so confident that things aren't as they seem? Why are they so confident that the government was responsible for 9/11, given the mountains of evidence that Al Qaeda did it? Because they think that aircraft impacts and the resulting fires couldn't have brought down the twin towers. 'Couldn't have' means 'it isn't physically possible for such a thing to have happened'. In the same way, Conspiracy Theories about the assassination of President Kennedy say that a single bullet couldn't have caused all the injuries to the president and to Governor Connally, who was riding with him in the presidential limousine when the fatal shots were fired. On the other hand, school shooting Conspiracy Theories don't deny that a lone gunman *could* have been responsible. They question the reality of the shooting rather than its possibility.

When Conspiracy Theories talk about what is or isn't physically possible, they rely - or claim to rely - on science. When someone argues that X didn't happen because it's not possible, the obvious reply is: 'well, X *did* happen, so X is possible'. Aircraft impacts *did* cause the twin towers to fall, so it was possible for them to do so. The science that is supposed to prove that aircraft impacts couldn't have brought down the towers, or that a single bullet couldn't have caused all the injuries that President Kennedy and Governor Connally suffered, is controversial. Most of the officially sanctioned experts take a different view. The question is, which experts should we trust? The only ones that Conspiracy Theorists are prepared to trust are other Conspiracy Theorists.

The fact that Conspiracy Theories reject the obvious explanation of events such as 9/11 and are so keen on the

idea of a mismatch between appearance and reality gives their theories an esoteric feel. That's another special feature of Conspiracy Theories. Once the obvious is ruled out and the far from obvious is ruled in, the Conspiracy Theorist's imagination can and usually does run wild. There is almost no explanation that isn't too bizarre for the Conspiracy Theorist's taste - apart, that is, from the obvious one. If how things are isn't how they look, who is to say how strange the actual truth is?

An amusing example of the Conspiracy Theorist's almost insatiable taste for the esoteric is Richard H. Popkin's account of the Kennedy assassination.¹³ The official view is that Oswald shot Kennedy without help from anyone else. But blaming Oswald is too easy for Popkin. He has other ideas, including the belief that the shooting was the work of a 'Second Oswald', a man who looked like Oswald but wasn't him. That's one of a long list of theories that Popkin is willing to contemplate. The more esoteric the theory, the greater its appeal to Conspiracy Theorists.

Popkin has a lot to say in his book about forensics and ballistics. Conspiracy buffs will know that questions about the trajectory of the bullets fired by Oswald and the wounds suffered by Kennedy and Connally have played a major part in debates about the assassination. Popkin isn't shy about weighing in on these issues. Yet he was no forensic scientist and had no proven expertise in wound ballistics, the scientific study of the effects of high-velocity projectiles on human tissue. Who, then, was Popkin, and what were his credentials for pontificating on these matters? He was, in fact, a professor of philosophy whose most famous work was a history of scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes.

If one were looking for a single word to describe the nature of Popkin's interest in the Kennedy assassination, that word

would be 'amateur'. And that's another feature of Conspiracy Theories. They are, by and large, amateurish. That's not a comment on their intellectual merits, but on the qualifications of the amateur sleuths and Internet detectives who push them. One of the most famous 9/11 Conspiracy Theorists, David Ray Griffin, was professor of philosophy of religion at the Claremont School of Theology in California. James Fetzer made his name as a philosopher of science based at the University of Minnesota in Duluth. Questions about the nature and merits of Conspiracy Theories are certainly philosophical (that's my excuse for writing this book); questions about the technical merits of individual Conspiracy Theories are not.

Philosophers aren't the only amateurs who weigh in on individual Conspiracy Theories. The contributors to a 2007 book on 9/11 Conspiracy Theories edited by Fetzer include a retired professor of economics, a professor of English, and a chief executive officer.¹⁴ Some 9/11 Conspiracy Theorists do have qualifications in relevant subjects such as mechanical engineering, but they are in a small minority. Besides, having a degree in a relevant subject doesn't mean that one's opinions have greater validity than those of countless mainstream experts in the same field who don't buy into Conspiracy Theories.

The amateurishness of many Conspiracy Theories has some strange consequences. Conspiracy Theorists who are quick to denounce mainstream academia for rejecting their theories nevertheless crave academic respectability. They set up pseudo-academic journals for the study of this or that alleged conspiracy and trumpet their PhDs, whatever their subject. They have a particular fondness for footnotes.¹⁵ As Jovan Byford notes, the footnote is so valuable to the amateur Conspiracy Theorist because it creates the impression that his theories are the product of reliable research into trustworthy sources. It's a pity, then,

that these trustworthy sources turn out to be, for the most part, other Conspiracy Theorists.

There's one more special feature of Conspiracy Theories that's worth noting. It's a feature identified in an article on conspiracy theories by the philosopher Brian Keeley.¹⁶ If nothing else, the article proves that not all philosophers who write about Conspiracy Theories are Conspiracy Theorists. Conspiracy Theories, Keeley cogently argues, embody a thoroughly outdated worldview and a perspective on the meaning of life that was more appropriate in the last century (by which he means the nineteenth century; Keeley's article was published in 1999). The worldview that Keeley describes is premodern. It is the view that complex events are capable of being controlled by a small number of people acting in secret, and this is what gives these events a deeper meaning. From this perspective, things always happen for a reason.

It's true, of course, that things sometimes happen for a reason - but not the reasons cited by Conspiracy Theories. Kennedy died for a reason: Oswald decided to shoot him and had the skill or luck to do it. But why did Oswald decide to murder Kennedy in the first place? And why was Oswald himself shot by Jack Ruby while in police custody? From a modern (as distinct from premodern) perspective, all we can really say is: shit happens.¹⁷ People do crazy things and there are limits to our ability to make sense of their actions. In these cases, there is no deeper meaning to be found and there are no all-powerful hidden conspirators pulling the strings.

The same goes for 9/11. Of course, that *was* a conspiracy, an Al Qaeda conspiracy. It's hard in retrospect to grasp its enormity and the huge slices of luck that were needed for Mohammad Atta and his fellow hijackers to pull off their operation. They certainly made mistakes and the

authorities missed many opportunities to foil the plot. Why were these opportunities missed? It didn't help that the FBI and the CIA were at loggerheads about Al Qaeda. If they had been more collaborative, they might have been able to stop the attacks. But there is no deeper meaning to the fact that they didn't collaborate. It's just how large bureaucracies work. Petty personal and institutional rivalries can have devastating consequences.¹⁸

It's time to take stock. I began by arguing that a Conspiracy Theory isn't just any old theory about a conspiracy. Conspiracy Theories have a bunch of special features that make them different from many other theories about conspiracies, such as the theory that Guy Fawkes and others conspired to blow up parliament in 1605 or the theory that the Joint Chiefs of Staff conspired against Cuba in 1962. More controversially, I suggested that it's precisely these special features of Conspiracy Theories that make them unlikely to be true. This is why it makes sense to think of such theories as forms of propaganda. Once you've given up on the idea that their point is to tell the truth, a different account of their function is called for.

Here, then, is my list of what makes Conspiracy Theories special. As I've tried to explain, these theories are speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish and premodern. This isn't an exhaustive list and I'll mention another special feature in chapter 4. But, if we stick to the current list, several things should now be clear. First, it should be clear why well-documented accounts of events like the Gunpowder Plot and Operation Northwoods aren't Conspiracy Theories; they lack at least the first four of my five features. There is nothing speculative, contrarian or esoteric about mainstream historical accounts of the Gunpowder Plot; and the people writing these accounts aren't amateurs. They are called historians.

The second thing that should now be clear is why widely discussed Conspiracy Theories about events like 9/11 really are Conspiracy Theories and not just theories about conspiracies. They have all the special features of Conspiracy Theories. The theory that governments agents somehow managed to plant explosives in the twin towers in advance of 9/11 and to detonate them just when the planes hit is speculative by anyone's lights, contrarian in every reasonable sense, and highly esoteric. Most of the people proposing this theory are amateurs and there is no doubt that their theory invests 9/11 with a meaning or significance it wouldn't otherwise have.

However, the most important point is this: theories that have all five of the special features of Conspiracy Theories that I've listed are *unlikely* to be true even if it is *possible* for them to be true. From the fact that a theory is speculative it doesn't follow that it is false. From the fact that a theory is contrarian or esoteric it doesn't follow that it is false either. Amateurs can and do sometimes discover truths missed by professionals. And sometimes major events do have a deeper meaning. But now put all these things together and you have a type of theory that is unlikely to be true. That's why we aren't justified in believing Conspiracy Theories. They aren't credible.

It's easy enough to see why speculative theories are much less likely to be true than non-speculative theories. Theories that are based on conjecture rather than solid evidence are doomed to be wrong more often than not. Of course, Conspiracy Theorists think that they have solid evidence in support of their theories, but it's in the nature of Conspiracy Theories to rely on circumstantial rather than direct evidence. The perfect conspiracy is one that leaves no trace and is therefore unknowable. In that sense, there's always a tension between the Conspiracy Theorist's view of the supposed conspirators as ingenious and all-

powerful and his confidence in his own ability to outfox them. If the conspirators are so clever, how come they have been rumbled by a bunch of amateurs? Or have they?

Are contrarian and esoteric explanations less likely to be true than conformist and mundane ones? That depends on what one thinks reality is like. If truth is stranger than fiction, then that would be a case for going against appearances and settling for the esoteric. But what if, as seems much more likely, fiction is stranger than truth? In that case, always assuming that things aren't as they seem won't be an effective explanatory strategy. Human conduct is sometimes unfathomable; but, when it isn't, the best explanations are remarkably mundane. You don't need a conspiracy to explain why the CIA screwed up over 9/11, just some basic knowledge of how large bureaucracies work. As good an explanation as any of Oswald's actions in Dallas is his well-documented desire for fame. He succeeded not because anyone else was helping him but because, as his army records show, he was a good shot.

When all these factors are added to the amateur status of most Conspiracy Theorists, there is only one possible conclusion: Conspiracy Theories could be true but are unlikely to be. But that doesn't matter if, as I've been arguing, their primary function is to promote a political or ideological agenda rather than to tell the truth. In practice what counts is not whether a Conspiracy Theory is true, but whether it is seductive. On that score it's hard to question the success of many Conspiracy Theories. They tell stories that people want to hear.

Whether these stories are really believed or not is sometimes hard to say. The fact that a person retweets a Conspiracy Theory doesn't necessarily mean that he believes it. But there is no doubt that people find Conspiracy Theories intriguing enough to want to circulate

them, discuss them and think about them. Why is that? This is where some psychologists see an opening. They want to explain the popularity of Conspiracy Theories, and of course they want to explain it in psychological terms. This brings us to my next question. Are psychological explanations of Conspiracy Theories any good? That's a question that deserves its own chapter.

Notes

- [1](#) D. Freeman and R. Bentall, 'The concomitants of conspiracy concerns', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 52 (2017): 595-604.
- [2](#) The name of my admirer is James Fetzer. There is more on him below.
- [3](#) Or involve dentists. See Michael Moore, *Dude, Where's My Country?* (Warner Books, 2003), p. 2.
- [4](#) Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories* (Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015), p. 62.
- [5](#) Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 45.
- [6](#) Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 95.
- [7](#) In his book *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Serif, 1996).
- [8](#) Robert Stone, 'The loser's loser', *New York Review of Books*, 22 June 1995.
- [9](#) In his book *Body of Secrets: How America's NSA and Britain's GCHQ Eavesdrop on the World* (Arrow Books,

2002).

10 Visit <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/news/20010430>.

11 See Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

12 Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds*, p. 68.

13 Richard H. Popkin, *The Second Oswald* (Boson Books, 2008).

14 J. Fetzer (ed.), *The 9/11 Conspiracy: The Scamming of America* (Catfeet Press, 2007).

15 For example, David Ray Griffin's *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions about the Bush Administration and 9/11* (Arris Books, 2004) has some two hundred pages of text followed by some fifty pages of notes.

16 Brian Keeley, 'Of conspiracy theories', *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999): 109-26.

17 P. Mandik, 'Shit happens', *Episteme: The Journal of Social Epistemology* 4 (2007): 205-18.

18 These rivalries are described by L. Wright in *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda's Road to 9/11* (Penguin Books, 2011).