The Need for Accountable Witnesses: A Reply to Dentith

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1 Publication year references, unless otherwise noted, are found in Dentith’s (2016) references.
Matthew R. X. Dentith’s paper (2016) explores the important epistemic issue of conspiracy theory as legitimate explanation. He provides, in his characteristically measured and cautious manner, a compelling critique of academic dismissals of conspiracy theorizing, a manner of explanation proven by ordinary experience and history. The critics of conspiracy theory advocate generalism, where conspiracy explanations are by nature extremely suspect. The generalist makes little distinction between any particular conspiracy theory and ignores the justificatory practices of conspiracy theorists, studiously avoiding their actual arguments. Dentith’s project is a gradualist, attrition approach. He undermines one generalist critique after another, gradually dismantling the cumulative generalist case. Dentith’s goal is, as conspiracy-minded novelist Agatha Christie would put it, “And then there were none”. In what follows, I will briefly contrast the attrition approach to an alternative one that critiques primary information sources in our Western information hierarchies.

Approaching the Critique of Conspiracy Theories

Dentith’s approach illustrates that generalist critiques of conspiracy theorizing are untenable. The generalist error varies in form, sometimes inventive, sometimes clumsy, but so far the result is always the same; failure. Yet the motive for attrition is not just this solid and growing induction against generalism, but the incompatibility of any significantly generalist approach with the fact that many conspiracy theories have proven true, be these modest or with profound political and economic dimensions. So while new generalist attempts will appear, those who use an attrition approach will successfully counter them. Dentith concludes we should adopt particularism; conspiracy theories should be responded to case-by-case, on the evidence for or against each. Particularism entails we evidentially examine, not dismiss, those we find salient.

A careful attention to conspiracy theories of society-shaping events is basic to any healthy democracy (Coady 2003, 2007, 2012). These explanations are the moral watch we set to defend our democracies against high-placed intrigues, be these political, economic, or both. In what follows we’ll restrict ourselves to Western-style democracies.

A “conspiracy” is where two or more persons intentionally cooperate to deceive others. Conspiracy theories are causal explanations. So a conspiracy theory is any explanation of events that includes a conspiracy as a salient cause. Dentith’s case for adopting this analytic

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2 Generalists admit important political conspiracy theories are sometimes true, but as Dentith notes, typically either redefine these as not “really” conspiracy theories (tacitly insisting on a pejorative connotation), or consign them to such rarity as to be irrelevant—radically freak events. Within the social psychology literature this is the orthodoxy.

3 Steve Clarke’s retracted deployment of Lakatos in “Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing”, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, (Vol. 32, No. 2) pp. 131-150, 2002, is among the more inventive. Quassim Cassam’s unfortunate, broad-brush accusation of “gullibility”, illustrates the other extreme, at least as Cassam’s thinking has developed up to this point. See Cassam’s (2015).

4 The “case-by-case” standard here termed “particularism” can be traced back to Keeley’s 1999.
definition, one unclouded by sociological or epistemic addendum, appears convincing. Claims about unpopularity (at least among academics and mainstream media) or evidential status can only be subsequent to a basic definition of what we are applying these characteristics to. If one asks, “What is it that you are saying is disliked or unlikely?” those who offer pejorative add-ons will have to cite the more basic notion, the definition of *conspiracy theory* itself. Dentith provides this. The categories “conspiracy theories” and “conspiracy explanations” emerge as co-extensive.5

Accusations of society-shaping, political and economic conspiracy should not seem surprising. If we start with personal experience, conspiracy explanations are natural, ordinary and often justified. We are a communication driven, highly social coordination-able species, imbued with the gift of tactical deception. We are also adept at intentionally coordinating this ability with others. We’ve all experienced this from a young age as low-grade conspirators ourselves, or the subjects of others’ modest conspiracies. All manner of friendship, sexual, business and other betrayals and manipulations illustrate this. Even many of the parenting tactics that were used to control us when young, such as our parents spelling out words they didn’t want us to understand, are conspiratorial. Don’t our political and economic elites retain these abilities? Why should we expect they neglect our well-developed human powers for cooperative deception when shaping the course of a *polis*? What is the reasoning, psychological, sociological, epistemic or otherwise, that indicates they would?

This problem is what the academic community has either openly struggled with or lockstep ignored. The issue appears settled in social epistemology. Conspiracy theories, as such, are as legitimate as any other explanations. The somewhat forced denial of the legitimacy of conspiracy explanations still reigns in the social sciences. In this debate we encounter a variety of responses that aim to either (a) deny the reality of society-shaping conspiracies that intrude upon our democratic process, or (b) deny the rationality of considering the issue and entertaining conspiratorial suspicions concerning political and economic leadership. Clearly (a) and (b) are linked. The standard argument for (b),

1. Democracy-undermining conspiracies are immoral and will rarely be pursued by our leadership, because in representational democracies leadership is overwhelmingly committed to democratic ideals.

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5 The issue of some sort of pejorative connotation may have been long over-played. The research of social psychologist Michael Wood (2016) indicates that “conspiracy theory” has no detectable pejorative connotation for most people in the west. A tentative but reasonable explanation of these initial results is that this pejorative connotation is largely limited to certain social elites, academia, mainstream media, and political and economic leadership. I suspect the pejorative connotation of “conspiracy theory” some of us still experience is best explained as the expression of an understandable and otherwise laudable political piety, a faith in our democratic system, and the fear that results from the derogatory claims some conspiracy theories make about our leadership and its conduct. This connotation is something entirely accountable by these emotions (2011), ones that respond to, do not determine, the notion of “conspiracy theory”. An open-minded study of the epistemology of these theories is one antidote for these emotions and the pejorative connotation they generate in some, much as a familiarity with different peoples and cultures is often an equally good antidote for an initial sense of fear or dislike.
This is the “good shepherd” theory essential to our western political ideology, a core “political piety” (Basham 2011). Philosopher Juha Raikka and me (2016) argue a parallel “conspiracy theory phobia” is evident in social science literature, one that distorts empirical research. This phobia is the defensive flipside of our political piety.\(^6\) (1) is supported by the simultaneously cynical and hopeful,

2. The public can trust its institutions of information acquisition and distribution to detect and expose high-placed, improper conspiracies by rogue leadership because these institutions are in competition to reveal such conspiratorial outrages and punish wrong-doers.

This is the “public trust approach” (PTA). Illustrations include Keeley’s classic, “Of Conspiracy Theories” (1999),\(^7\) political scientists Joseph Uscinski and Joe Parent’s Conspiracy Theories in America (2014),\(^8\) and the routine pronouncements of our mainstream media outlets, where they portray themselves as fearless advocates of the truth concerning all things the public needs to know in a functional democracy.\(^8\) Keeley formulates the PTA in terms of an analogy to peer-reviewed science. Just as scientists compete to uncover, confirm and broadcast the latest discoveries concerning the natural world, so corporate media and government law enforcement equally compete to uncover, confirm and broadcast the latest malevolent corporate or governmental conspiracies. If such revelation has not been made, it is therefore highly likely the conspiracy theory is false. Our primary information sources, mainstream media and national law enforcement will expose bad leaders, remove them and these persons will be punished. This is the proposed enforcement mechanism for (1) in our democracies.\(^9\)

Unfortunately, the PTA fails: First, it is question begging against the conspiracy theorist, who has already questioned the veracity of mainstream sources of information. Second, it is circular in that it relies on mainstream media and governmental sources about their own intentions and conduct in order to validate it. Third, it suffers numerous and unnerving counter-examples.\(^10\) Forth, most importantly, it ignores the many other motives, besides reliable public revelation, that animate these institutions. These other motives can cause corporate media and national law enforcement to simply neglect investigation. This is the

\(^6\) We unearth numerous examples from the social sciences of this phobia (2016).

\(^7\) Also see Keeley’s 2003 defense of his 1999.

\(^8\) It’s interesting how often this claim lies behind the absence of evidence is evidence of absence typical of news reporting, “there is no evidence we are aware of at this time for \(p\)” to the conclusion, \(p\) is false. This presupposes the press is reliable in both evidential resources and willingness to come forward. This practice is at the center of Keeley’s approach and appears in his discussion.

\(^9\) (1) is often defended, sometimes vehemently, in public discourse; again an expression of political piety. The corresponding heresy are conspiracy theories about important contemporary political events it Western democracies. It appears to be a “gate-keeping” concept in mainstream western political discourse, which people, even the ordinary “persons on the street”, are well aware of and ritually disavow any violation of, prefacing their remarks, “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but…”, and then precede to commit the outrage.

\(^10\) The conduct of the Vietnam War and the Atomic energy commissions cover-up of the effects of fallout on the civilian population (“down-winders”) of nuclear weapons testing in the US. There is also a persuasive case that the Bush administration intentionally orchestrated a disinformation campaign to convince the US populace to support an invasion of Iraq.
problem of “toxic truths” (2011, 2017a), where the investigation and public dissemination of information can destabilize society, extending to escalating riots or civil war, as well as many other debilitating effects. This underlies the “why look?” scenario, where certain investigations are avoided simply because their potential results are dangerous to the fabric of society. While the PTA suffers a number of recent counter-examples, it’s also important to notice these typically come to light only at a safe distance in time from the events in question—usually decades later. People view them as quite separate from the current manner of affairs. Ironically, this attitude helps enable repetition. Finally, the PTA ignores discreet weak points in our information hierarchy where a few well-placed individuals can radically alter the narrative pursued by both mainstream media and national law enforcement (2017a). In neither need these individuals be high-placed in the information hierarchy, such as editors or directors, but only well placed within the “information” gathering level (2017b). This includes, for instance, the US intelligence community and what didn’t happen in the gulf of Tonkin on March 4th, 1964 (discussed below).

Like any analysis the PTA can be abused. Recall Sunstein and Vermeule’s (2009) notorious policy recommendation of covert, conspiratorial government “cognitive infiltration” of citizen groups who accuse Western governments of conspiring against their citizens: The goal is to “break up” these groups. Sunstein et al justify this conspiracy with Keeley’s arguments for the PTA. This is odd, as the PTA assures us that such an anti-democratic and clearly illegal covert government undertaking will likely be revealed. Kurtis Hagan provides us a compelling critique of their ironic views (2010).

3. Only “structural”, non-conspiratorial explanations are intellectually admissible. Conspiracy theories are vacuous, a “paranoid” explanatory style.

Neo-Marxists like Noam Chomsky and many social scientists insist on this. Accusations of conspiratorial, anti-democratic control are too individualistic, ignoring societal forces like class, false consciousness and others. This is a false dichotomy. Conspiracies among powerful individuals can be expressions of structural forces, indeed conspiracies are predicted by these forces. Similarly, some philosophers have claimed conspiratorial explanations are too dispositional (Clarke 2002, 2006; Mandik 2006). But presumably, they also believe the epistemic dispositions of philosophers and others to their articles, the activities of legislatures and especially of the voting public, are nevertheless properly explained by individual dispositions. Many political scientists and economists also wish to avoid particular historical events as pivotal because their explanatory theories lack the resolution to recognize and factor-in these events.

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11 The arguments concerning toxic truths are complex (see 2017a). But in the extreme case of revolution, as a participant at the University of Turku, Finland in 2016, remarked, “What’s so wrong with a justified revolution?” If justified, nothing could be wrong.

12 Their recommendation is particularly surprising from law professors (University of Chicago). It is illegal, to start with, because it directly undermines the protections of the 1st and 14th amendments to the US constitution: The 1st because theirs is an attempt to sabotage the free press and prevent peaceful association for the redress of grievances, the 14th because it denies equal protection under the law. For instance, imagine if someone proposed the US Government covertly infiltrate orthodox Jewish synagogues or homosexual rights organizations in order to “break up” these groups? Mr. Obama’s appointment of Sunstein as chief officer of the Federal public information office accents the irony.
None of these artificial limitations should distract us. Any redaction of human historical causation, ancient or recent, is misguided. Dentith notes historical scholarship accurately invokes anti-democratic, conspiratorial explanations among high-placed leadership as important in recent history. One simply can’t chronicle the crimes of the Third Reich, premiere Stalin or even the deceits of the Atomic Energy Commission without conspiracy explanations. Pigden emphasizes this (1995). One among many tragic instances of these conspiratorial pivot points is the US intelligence community’s cover-up of what didn’t happen in the gulf of Tonkin. A non-existent attack on US Naval forces was used by US leadership to justify the Vietnam War to the US public and the world. Yet the US intelligence community and other high placed political players knew it didn’t occur (NSA historian Hanyok (2001) and many other historians). However, president Johnson confidently announced the attack to the world. Eventually this led to the death of at least a million people. Dentith notes that there are many similar examples that vary in scope and impact in mainstream historiography. On reflection (3) is a priori in character, contradicts well-established human history and so is an empirical non-starter.

On the basis of these three background premises, social scientists nevertheless frame their research efforts with the pathologizing premise,

4. Typically those who believe conspiracy theories are cognitively pathological, they are irrational ((b) above).

Given anyone possessing a passing acquaintance with history believes a great many true conspiracy theories, including recent ones, (4) certainly comes as a surprise (1995). Yet with (3) off the table, only (2), the PTA, makes (4) more than a strange point of departure for research, as any significant warrant for (1) relies upon (2). It is the epistemic hinge upon which pathologizing social science turns. Our problem, as epistemologists and as empirical researchers, is that the PTA suffers many failure-points, including many cases critical to the conduct of democracy. So, (4) not only lacks warrant on the standard argument. It appears to be a false, research-distorting assumption. Are there plausible surrogates for the PTA? None have emerged in the literature.

Objections to the PTA alert us to significant problems in Western-style information hierarchies. As falls the PTA, so falls the presumption against conspiracy explanations of momentous, society-shaping events that are contrary to official stories. A studied agnosticism about particular conspiracy theories is often the result. For instance, any

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13 Philosopher Charles Pigden emphasizes this throughout his work on these questions.
14 Hanyok’s study, undertaken for internal use by the NSA, was officially released after a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) lawsuit.
15 Social psychologists often point to the fact that people who suspect (which the psychologists strangely equate with believe) some conspiracy theories are true also suspect others are true. But this is an entirely rational practice. If suspect certain high-placed officials have lied to the public in the past, I will be more suspicious others doing the same in the future. The only difference in the conspiracy case is the deception is cooperative among some limited number of them.
16 Particularly at the data interpretation stage, where the pathologizing assumption reigns supreme in psychology: Here it generates some rather bizarre interpretations of participant responses.
explanation for 9/11, or Pearl Harbor, or so on, official or otherwise, must be a conspiracy theory, so with the failure of the PTA we are forced to take quite seriously even conspiracy accusations aimed at our Western governments.\(^{17}\) We might conclude this is where the initial phase of the epistemic debate ends, and the proper departure for future research on the epistemic problems suffered by steep information hierarchies. One way to recognize these problems is to contrast warranted formation of social beliefs in small, tight-knit societies, where mutual surveillance and mutual knowledge of personal character is high, to social belief formation in civilizations like ours, where epistemic reliance on others far removed and unknown to us is almost complete. This approach explores problems with the reliability of primary epistemic sources in our information hierarchies.

**Getting One’s Hands Dirty**

Instead of pursuing this more basic issue, Dentith opts to “get his hands dirty” with the details of today’s strategies in academia and derivatively in mainstream media, to avoid alternative conspiracy theories. He deploys the attrition approach effectively. Both approaches, the critique of primary sources, and attrition are complimentary. His emphasis on the complex task of independently examining each of the mines in a minefield of academic dismissal of conspiracy explanation requires a daunting amount work—like Wellington at Waterloo. He reveals the intricate evasions of one of the most social of issues in social epistemology. We may prefer, or blend, either approach. To me a blend seems best.

There are advocates of open society in academia. Others who wish to strictly limit it, pathologizing those who question official narratives.\(^ {18}\) But as Pigden, Coady and Dentith remind, the salvation of a functional democracy is found in watchfulness of the citizen. This often requires their conspiracy theorizing. We should envision a new network of public information, not our steeply hierarchical one. This is epistemically analogous to having many witnesses, not just a few, easy to corrupt ones. We also need something beyond our rather random, hyper-emotional and epistemically undisciplined, embryonic internet. So we also need an open-society epistemology and ethics of discourse so this network can be fairly rational and actually fearlessly illuminating, with the power of applying real accountability; the essence of particularism.\(^ {19}\) Dentith’s work is cutting edge.

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**References**


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\(^{17}\) As Dentith notes sometimes inference to a conspiracy is not only the best explanation it’s an unavoidable inference. The Litvinenko poisoning is another illustration: Every account of it must involve a conspiracy, even in the case of a political-show suicide. Even on this unlikely scenario, a secret supplier had to be involved who agreed not to reveal the buyer(s) of the rare and extraordinarily expensive radioactive isotope that killed apparently Litvinenko.

\(^{18}\) The recent firing of tenured Journalism professor Dr. James Tracy might be an extreme example of this.

\(^{19}\) Dentith is actively developing a version of such an epistemic, open-society ethics at his post-doctorate position (personal correspondence). I look forward to his progress.


Sunstein, Cass R., and Adrian Vermeule. “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures.” *Journal of