Between Two Generalisms: A Reply to Stokes

Lee Basham, South Texas College


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Most of us are fond of retro music, movies, what have you, some even epistemology. Let’s roll back to the 1990s. In his enjoyable, wide-ranging “Between Generalism and Particularism: A Reply to Basham and Dentith” Patrick Stokes encounters issues that have concerned social epistemologists for the last 20 years, Charles Pigden, Brian Keeley, David Coady, Kurtis Hagen and Matthew Dentith among them. I’m happy to be somewhere in the mix. The “furious agreement” Stokes notices is just thoughtful consensus. Even our new friends, the social psychologists, are increasingly on board. Stokes’ concerns are important and remain common in mainstream media and government discourse, if less among the public. He returns us to “the roots”, which these epistemologists, as well as cultural theorists like Peter Knight, Jodi Dean, Jack Bratich, Gina Husting and Martin Orr encourage us to grow beyond.

A problem some might wish to talk around which these theorists and others converge on, is the recurrent lack of transparency in our information hierarchies; political, economic and on occasion, scientific. Information control and the imposition and maintenance of constraining interpretive narratives is the habitual recourse in the stability of our hierarchical societies. This induces powerful stresses within our social epistemology. Because Stokes so quickly crosses so much territory, any response enjoys much to deal with.

Subject at Hand, Social Epistemology

Stokes claims he seeks a halfway house between particularism and generalism. In itself, that’s encouraging, given the dangers of generalism to democracies. Traditional generalism claims conspiracy theories are to be treated as prima facie false because they are conspiracy theories (or be subject to some similar epistemic mal-attitude). Particularism rejects the biasing prima facie false presumption against conspiracy theory. It treats conspiracy explanations as any other explanations; simply a question of evidence. Particularists tend to think conspiracies are normal to human conduct, so there’s no reason to think our natural ability vanishes in the upper reaches of our economic and political hierarchies. Some suspicion is proper. But it’s a mistake to think particularism is the opposite of generalism. The opposite might be labeled anti-generalism: conspiracy theories are prima facie true. Both appear equally pathological in manner and measure. Generalists and anti-generalists tend to end up in similar places. Generalists are usually found as lower-level, true-believing functionaries in political parties and within cubicles in certain academic departments, while anti-generalists are often found in mental asylums or in the company of stolen shopping carts. Neither have much to recommend them as life-styles or epistemic positions. Particularism is the better place, a commonsense halfway house between either extreme.

Particularism and generalism have social consequences. Generalism functions as a stabilizing, silencing tactic concerning conspiracy explanations and as bridge to the pathologizing approach to those who explore conspiracy explanations. Particularism takes a cautious view of institutions that can gain much by public deception; governments, mass media and
corporations. Conspiratorial, often illegal, activity is a significant possibility here and often powerfully anti-democratic. So conspiracy theories alleging such should be evaluated solely case by case, on the basis of evidence, without any epistemic mal-biasing. For particularism, the salvation of the state lies in watchfulness of the citizen.

Generalism expresses the piety that Western political and economic hierarchies rarely conspire against citizens, and mass media and national law enforcement can and will almost inevitably investigate and expose them should they ever make the attempt. The way paranoid anti-generalism embraces all conspiracy theories, generalism takes an equally paranoid stance to the very idea of conspiracy.

Presented with a dilemma argument with a conclusion one dislikes, one escape is to deny the disjuncts are exhaustive. Seek a halfway house. The trick is to have the halfway house be distinct from the original disjuncts. Stokes labels his halfway house between particularism and generalism as (a) “defeasible generalism” or alternatively, (b) “reluctant particularism”.

About (a): All generalists have an “ultimately defeasible” caveat because all grudgingly recognize that some conspiracy theories have proven true or well-warranted. But they require “overwhelming” evidence be presented before a conspiracy theory is to be considered as plausible. That places Stokes position squarely within the generalist camp. It does not distinguish Stokes’ position from traditional generalism, a position that on reflection appears untenable.

About (b): If “reluctant particularism” is “defeasible generalism” by another name, “conspiracy theories are prima facie false, but if presented with “overwhelming” evidence in their favor we will reluctantly concede they’re well-warranted or true, then again this merely relabels old-style generalism.

If “reluctant” means we will not immediately embrace a theory, but seek significant evidence for or against, then this is simply the particularist position. We have the same “reluctance” towards any scientific theory. This reluctance doesn’t view the theory as prima facie false. Saying a theory is not yet warranted is not to say it probably never will be, just because of the sort of theory it is. Any explanation of events or phenomena in the context of competing explanations leads to this sort of “reluctance” on the part of a judicious evaluator. As evidence accrues, rejection, acceptance or agnosticism emerge. Not only the method of empirical science, it is also the method of academic history, the best journalism, and legal investigation into conspiratorial activities. The last three are rife with well-evidenced conspiracy theory. True, a few conspiracy theorists are evidentially incorrigible, but most are not. True, a few scientists and philosophers are evidentially incorrigible, when their guiding framework runs into problems, but most are not.

Stokes quickly opts for traditional generalism. He remains reasonable when invoking reality; his few examples of conspiracy theory all resort to particularism.

At this point we may have noticed that “generalism”, and any admixture with it, is intrinsically vague; what is “overwhelming”? What does “prima facie” really come to? In contrast, particularism focuses on evidence and proportions the selection of conspiracy theories to investigate on grounds of personal, political and human salience.
Meet the Public Trust Approach (again)

Stokes prefaces his remarks by resurrecting an element of Brian Keeley’s (1999) argument in “Of Conspiracy Theories”,

… I’d suggest we have reasons to be wary of conspiracy theorizing as a practice simply because the internal logic of conspiracy explanation disconnects the morally serious act of accusation from the force of evidence. To defend a conspiracy theory over any length of time typically requires the conspiracy theorist to recruit more and more people to the conspiracy. Conspiracy theory as a practice does not simply trade in suspicion, but in accusation without warrant.

Stokes’ remark is a skeletal version of the “public trust approach” (PTA). So commonplace in media and governing discourse it qualifies as Western political orthodoxy. This puts Stokes on the far side of generalism, one almost as extreme as might be imagined. Wisely, Keeley does not leap to the conclusion that conspiracy theory is accusation without warrant. Criticisms of the PTA are well-known and numerous in the literature. Even Keeley has abandoned the argument Stokes resurrects.

An insistence on ever-growing conspiracy is empirically mistaken. Most ambitious conspiracies don’t require ever-growing conspiratorial casts. So neither do theories about them. It’s easy to show conspiracies can be conducted with a surprisingly limited number of people. The vast majority empowering a conspiracy need not know what the goals of the conspiratorial leadership are and believe they are pursuing something entirely different. This is especially evident in hierarchical institutions, where people participate in well-compartmentalized roles within a top-down system of command and goal-interpretation.

Nor do most conspiracy theories trade in unwarranted accusation. A cursory examination of contemporary conspiracy theorizing quickly reveals that the argumentation used in most mature conspiracy theories is conducted with standards of evidence and inference we all share. Virtually all socially prominent conspiracy theories have significant warrant, even though it is often indecisive. That indecisiveness might be revealing. Whatever the case, it leaves us with rejection or a studied agnosticism. Conspiracy theorists’ careful evidential effort is an important reason why people are interested in these explanations. These aren’t baseless mutterings in alleys and on message boards. That’s a strawperson. They need much more than that to gain and hold anyone’s attention in today’s information-saturation.

Keeley, no friend of conspiracy theory, repeatedly makes this point. Many conspiracy theories, especially the most ambitious and popular, enjoy valid inferences and significant evidence; warrant. Pigden, Coady, Hagen, Dentith and myself have all pressed this. It’s an empirical reality. The developments within, and significant self-corrections, of alternative 9/11 conspiracy theories, are a useful casebook. Contra generalism, if we are to understand these conspiracy theories, we must carefully study them. Whatever we make of them, intellectual honesty forces us to concede they aren’t just “trading in accusation without
warrant”. If they were, there would not be the sizable, detailed, intelligent discussions for and against them on the internet.

Even when a conspiracy is strongly suggested by publically available facts and observations, many institutions have non-epistemic motives that prevent them from exploring these conspiratorial possibilities and encourage them to actively dismiss, socially disqualify and effectively silence those who do explore these explanations. None of this involves being intentional co-conspirators. Some avenues of investigation are simply too economically, politically or socially “toxic” to pursue (the “why look” problem). Institutional forces and society stabilizing interests are all it takes. The Atomic Energy Commission irradiated millions of Americans during atomic bomb tests of the 1950s, leading to the fallout deaths in thousands of livestock and hundreds of thousands of human cancer deaths. They assured the public, contrary to their knowledge otherwise, that they were doing nothing dangerous and deadly. It is hardly surprising that the department of Agriculture didn’t hold a press conference to correct the deception, or that mainstream media did not investigate. No phone calls were necessary, no payoffs or threats. The topic was untouchable in the fear-hysteria of the 1950s. It was as toxic as the radioactive fallout. To do so would be “siding with the communists”. When a similar fear-hysteria swept the US post 9/11, the same move was applied to silence critics of the official story; they were “siding with the terrorists”. One would think this would be obvious to Stokes, as it was a source of great consternation and discussion in academia, post 9/11 as it was in the 1950s.

With Stokes’ halfway house nowhere in sight, issues of truth or warrant accordingly swept aside with the wand of generalism, we needn’t be detained by the question, is the conspiracy theory true? We can indulge a generalism of non-epistemic proportions; moral censure. This can only be consistent with epistemic generalism if it equally rejects conspiracy theories. For Stokes, it meets or exceeds. For Pigden, Coady, Dentith and others the moral verdict is the opposite: In a democracy moral considerations strongly support taking many conspiracy theories quite seriously, initially and then on the basis of evidence.

**Moral Issues**

Moving from the epistemic to moral, Stokes claims our fellow citizens are immoral to publically share conspiratorial possibilities. Here the “immoral” is a simple consequentialism. Sharing them without rejection does social harm, so they should not be shared. While he makes no attempt to show they do more harm than good, Stokes seems to assume this is obvious. That’s easy to contest and has been in the literature. But let’s look at his examples, because he uses these not just as a moral critique of belief in particular conspiracy theories, but ironically, as a critique of particularism,

Conspiracy theories persist for years, even decades, in the absence of evidence, and can continue to cause harms while they do. There was never any evidence to suggest that AIDS was invented by Western drug companies and governments in an attempt to exploit and control Africa, yet this belief persisted long enough to kill over 330,000 people.

We should note “never any evidence” stamps for important political claims are almost always false, simplicities that social epistemology can rarely enjoy concerning anything socially momentous. This caution made, Stokes’ argument appears to be a 5 step one,
1) Epistemic generalism is true; epistemic issues are “off the table” except in extremely rare cases (traditional generalism);

2) Many popular conspiracy theories cause harm;

3) If a theory causes harm, it is morally suspect (consequentialism);

4) Particularism claims we should evaluate conspiracy theories on the evidential warrant of each;

5) Unwarranted conspiracy theories are popularly believed for long periods of time without evidence (the “unreasoning masses” gambit).

So, Particularism is not the correct approach to conspiracy theorizing.

Invalid as it stands, it must be an enthymeme; there’s a missing, assumed to be obvious premise. We’ll return to that.

(4) is definitional. For the moment the interesting claims (1), (3) and (5) can wait. Let’s look at (2).

Stokes’ South African AIDS example doesn’t illustrate (2). In the paper he cites these 330,000 deaths were not caused by warrantless popular belief in an anti-Western conspiracy theory, thundering through the cities and villages. Instead the tragedy begins with a top-down decision in 1987 to reject anti-HIV drugs by the newly minted post-racist government of South Africa. Motivated by scientifically valid, if ultimately mistaken early doubts about HIV causation, racially and politically amplified by an understandable desire to demonstrate independence from Western nations, the SA federal government rejected offers of free anti-HIV drugs. The paper’s premise is that had the government accepted and distributed the drugs, most would have gladly used them and the 330,000 would have been saved. “Denialism” is not the same as “conspiracy theory”.

But let’s pretend, far-fetched as it is, that the SA government in 1987 really believed anti-HIV drugs were Western stealth genocide and successfully propagated the same absurdity in the public. Is this a counter-example to particularism? Transparently the opposite. Particularism challenges unwarranted conspiracy theories. Which is exactly what happened, even on the “sincerely believed conspiracy theory” scenario; by 2008 the SA government’s minister health announced that “HIV denialism” was dead, along with much tragic human evidence. Evidence prevails.

(2) also appears to be false at large, as does the cynicism of (5); the “unreasoning masses” gambit popular among some political, economic and academic elites. Instead we typically observe the success of evidence-dissemination and open debate. The anti-vaccination movement has been profoundly undermined. Particularism. Many of the tenants of the 9/11
truth movement have been abandoned by its own members after lengthy, public, rational debate, some them quite quickly, even within months. Particularism. Similarly, and at the cost of significant social and personal anguish, the Iraq war is now widely recognized in the West to be an act of political conspiracy on the part of the US and other Western governments, particularly those of Bush and Blair. Particularism. The future wars particularism can prevent on the basis of past accuracy and future deployment are worthy of our moral consideration.

Returning to the argument above, the missing premise appears to be,

(6) Our default analysis of conspiracy theories should not be in terms of evidential merit, but in terms of how they promote or undermine our political projects; those that undermine these should be rejected, those that promote these should be promoted.

This is reminiscent of the position of Sunstien and Vermeule, who argue conspiracy theories the government finds objectionable should be undermined by covert governmental “cognitive infiltration”; the government conspiring against citizens who accuse the government of conspiring against citizens. As Hume would say, it’s hard to imagine a position less worthy of serious refutation. There is nothing epistemically suspect about conspiracy theories as such, distinguishing them from other political and economic explanations. The official account of 9/11 is a conspiracy theory. The non-conspiratorial “bizarre series of aviation mishaps” theory has no privileged status for being non-conspiratorial. It fares poorly. Any plausible explanation of 9/11 is a conspiracy theory. The question is which conspiracy theory? We face the same in Litvinenko’s polonium poisoning; a conspiracy, but whose? One by fellow dissidents attempting to embarrass the Russian government, or by the Kremlin, punishing their critics?

Again, as a political tool generalism isn’t about dismissing “conspiracy theories”, it’s about silencing those who the political hierarchy, and those who find comfort within that hierarchy, dislike. But a reflexive habit of reasoning through evidence is the core value of democracy. Generalism stands in stark contrast. Particularism is an epistemic project: The conditional, if we adopt particularism, we are more able to detect real conspiracies, and more able to critique claims about conspiracies that are not. We can also recognize when the evidence is indeterminate. Not an epistemic piety, it’s a social project and more often than not, an empirical reality; functional democracy.

To the basic moral question: Perhaps the worst naiveté is a discourse-censoring generalism about conspiracy theories. Instead of a fair and open debate, a measured patience to sift through the facts, the orthodoxy of generalism won out, and to date at least 500,000 innocent people have died in the Iraq invasion and cascade of wars that followed. Previously, an intelligence community conspiracy about what didn’t happen on March 4, 1964, in the gulf of Tonkin led to the deaths of over 2,000,000, even though the possibility of a conspiracy to justify the war on false pretenses was quickly raised. The accusation the North Vietnamese in 1964 would attack the US Navy was ridiculous. Yet generalism proved the popular, though delusional, default value. The tradition of generalism of whatever form or guise reopens the path to moral disaster; as it has been it will be. Abbot Anshin Thomas puts it, “If nothing changes, nothing changes”.
Generalism is us continuing the same mistakes. If we aim to generate ever-growing body counts, the future surely lies with generalism. Particularism directly confronts theories that are unwarranted (Jews are trying to destroy Western civilization), promotes well-evidenced conspiracy theories (the US deceived the world to go to war with Iraq) or shows that we can have no more confidence in a theory than against it, agnosticism (certain Russians are conspiring to re-invade Western Europe).

The Tracy Affair

What are the ethical consequences of publically disseminating or seeking evidence for conspiracy theories? Different theories, in different hands, will have different consequences. It’s not about conspiracy theories or theorizing. The Tracy affair illustrates one person’s misguided actions at the end of an extreme and long drawn out case, involving Tracy’s questions about the reality of the Sandy Hook murders. It has no epistemic relevance to how we should approach conspiracy theories as such. Nor can it support a broad-brush normative rejection. It’s revealing Stokes doesn’t opt for generalism in the Tracy affair, declaring “It’s a conspiracy theory” and asking us to move on. Instead he opts for particularism, evaluating Tracy’s evidence as “weak”.

Conclusion

We don’t need a world increasingly closed, but one more open. Respect for conspiratorial possibilities is integral to this. The truth of our times, and any, is that we are frequented by conspiracies within our political and economic hierarchy. From either an epistemic or moral perspective, Stokes has not located a halfway house but a traditional generalism, epistemically and normatively; generalism doubled, “super-generalism”, one commonplace among our political, economic, media and academic elites.

It’s no surprise Stokes, seeking a halfway house after rejecting particularism, must be driven to generalism. Unfortunately, this also forces him, with other researchers, to pathologize billions of reasonable people. This is usually done by omission: (1) don’t recognize the critical role of conspiracy theory in fully functioning democracies (highlighted by Pigden, Coady and Dentith), (2) offer no examples in recent history of the many true and socially beneficial conspiracy theories, (3) offer none of the legion of examples of when the polis entertained conspiracy theories, gathered evidence on its own—unguided by government or mass media—and rejected those theories as unwarranted, (4) erroneously de-rationalize billions of rational persons, asserting that counter-evidence will bounce off those taking conspiratorial explanations seriously (“the unreasoning masses” gambit) and (5) don’t recognize the careful, often even-handed reasoning we see in conspiracy theory communities, reasoning that leads to public revelation. This is the essence of the increasingly discredited pathologizing approach to conspiracy theories and theorists in the social sciences. One is left with the impression these researchers have not actually tried to understand conspiracy theory and its theorists, but have arrived on the “scene of the crime”, already knowing who the guilty are. This is understandable, expressing a Western political piety of
our times, but a piety that, to the consternation of many elites, appears to be collapsing within the general populace.

It should collapse. Generalism isn’t the morally appropriate attitude in an open society, a functioning democracy. It ignores the key roles conspiracy theorists play in securing our democracy; frequently these people are acting in our self-defense. It can’t come to terms with the many ways steep information hierarchies like our own can fail and frequently have failed to disseminate crucial information to the public. With open, fair-minded evidential discussion set aside—particularism—it inevitably leaves us with a highly censorial, de-rationalizing and mentally manipulative pathologizing response to those who voice suspicions of conspiratorial activities, no matter how well thought out. We know the answer as soon as we identify their suspicions as those of conspiracy: Pathologize, disqualify and silence.

This is immoral and dangerous. Many European Jews understood the NAZIs would never stop at the legal restrictions of the Nuremburg laws. Even though this fear was denounced as an “outrageous conspiracy theory”, they spread the outrage. Among them, Einstein fled. Millions saved themselves. 30 years later hundreds of millions of Americans and Europeans accused the aptly named “coalition of the willing” of being based on lies and fear-mongering manipulations, which mass media in the US and many other countries cooperated with. The conspiracy theorists were right. Half a million have died in the Middle East, largely because of the disqualifying tactic of generalism and the pathologizing of reasonable people it entails. When “a war to save democracy” is used to perpetuate a dismissal of critical questions about the real aims and unreal evidence offered by leadership we should attend carefully to our conspiracy theorists. Generalism is deadly.

The reason is simple. Human life is conspiratorial. We can face this, embrace it, but if we deny it, we empower it in the worst way. It’s commonplace, natural to an intelligent, social and competitive species at our level of cooperative and communicative sophistication. People keep sexual secrets, cover for friends, cooperate in mutually beneficial thefts from employers, arrange global business manipulations, distort elections. The list goes on at any level of social organization, of any kind. Common sense and established history also shows conspiracy in the face of political oppression, manipulation and tyranny, is vastly beneficial. The mutual vigilance conspiracy generates between great nations, and the uncertainties it forces on policy, prevent wars of aggression. Like any social ability, conspiracy is what you make of it. The same applies to conspiracy theory. Like any other means of explanation, it has powerful abuses and absolutely critical uses.

Patrick Stokes’ motives are the best. His “full disclosure” tells us he combats those who question vaccine safety and efficacy. Laudable. Stokes’ position would be more plausible if he focused on anti-vaccination. That places him where he really lives; particularism. One shouldn’t generalize from a good fight against a narrow class of conspiracy theories to a condemnation of them all. That’s a broadside against all of us, including Stokes. We all embrace well-warranted conspiracy theories on all levels of social relationship and organization. Mass media and government protests notwithstanding, social research shows the vast majority of us experience no pejorative connotation to the term “conspiracy theory”. Good news for functioning democracies.
Generalism serves to perpetuate, not confront, the real vulnerabilities in our information hierarchy. We should welcome its fading. A 21st century epistemic honesty beckons. Between the extremes of generalism and anti-generalism, the real halfway house is particularism. It keeps a light on, and something good in the oven. As Patricia learns at the end of the Wizard of Oz, there’s “no place like home”.

Contact details: labasham@southtexascollege.edu