Pathologizing Open Societies: A Reply to the *Le Monde* Social Scientists

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The Le Monde social scientists’ statement begins,

Let’s fight conspiracy theories effectively. The Ministry of Education must test its pedagogical tools against conspiracy culture. The wrong cure might only serve to spread the disease.

This is a paradigm instance of a political pathologizing project. Here, it is applied to conspiracy theorizing and theorists. Which includes all of us. We all are aware of, and believe on the basis of good evidence, contemporary conspiracies happen, even, and even especially, at the highest levels of power, and in this knowledge and expectation, we are not pathological.

Pathologizing projects are ordinary to establishmentarian political cultures. These political cultures understand themselves through a biological metaphor; they are the body, and what is not of the body must be identified and eliminated. Hence the purpose of the establishment: To protect its way of life. The familiar methods include surveillance to detect alien thought and activities, censorship of what might spread these and control and elimination of its sources, rather like a cancer from within, or as we witness in the Le Monde declaration, a disease of mysterious origin. This familiar cognitive hygiene tactic makes its entrance: Society has been infiltrated by this threatening “mindset” (in the past, Communists, Satanist day-care operators, and so on); the enemy within scenario. They are everywhere but they look like us. Cognitive epidemiologists are then called to duty. Sometimes they even line up.

The goal of pathologizing projects is to disqualify a class of citizens from public discourse, silence them, ideally, eliminate them in one manner or another. In one way or another, to disappear them from the dominant discourse of the times. It is a method of dealing with dissident citizens. The formula is simple: Pathologize, disqualify, silence, disappear. These are historically applied to any group deemed sufficiently efficacious in society and excessively contrary to certain political and ideological tenets. Today the pathologizing approach is increasingly applied to those who question the veracity of their governments and suspect these governments are, on occasion, involved in organized, deeply anti-democratic, improper public deception. But only a thoughtful attention to conspiracy theory, on the merits of evidence, can meet the threat such conspiracies present. Evidence is the key. Nothing else suffices.

Let us be clear: These authors motives are not in question; only their assumptions and goals.¹ They appear to actually believe in a sort of society-wide epidemic. In the US, the UK and

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¹ The Le Monde authors report they suffer popular hatred, “The whole issue [in] numerous online discussions and the type of hate mail ‘they’ regularly receive from ‘historically or politically literate’ (12) defenders of the truth, sometimes also called ‘conspiracy theorists’: ‘But what about the real conspiracies?’” Why anyone would think this “hate mail” is unclear. Perhaps there may be other examples more clearly hateful. I hope not. But a
France, this small group of social scientists have been used by governments to play a key role in the first stage of this pathologizing project. Now they ask to directly assist the government to fund their development of sophisticated psychological techniques to successfully prevent the public from conspiracy theorizing, or as they put it, “just asking some questions”. The disappear phase. To this end, they offer their services.

As one philosopher prominent in the field proposes, the *Le Monde* piece is merely an appeal for more funding, marketed as a cognitive hygiene crusade. This is a kindly, if minimizing, apologetic. And they might devise some clever disqualifying-silencing techniques as a result, too. The question that faces our democratic polis is more pressing: Why should we wish them to? And pay them for it?

They never address this in their original statement or subsequent response. It is a given. Most philosophers in the field and a significant number of social scientists and cultural theorists, as well as the public at large, are rightfully skeptical of such a project by any government. They have increasingly, and with good reason, come to recognize that conspiracy theorizing is a thoughtful, normal and democratically necessary social activity. There is no mention of these critical facts in the *Le Monde* statement, but a rather disturbing omission of them. Conspiracy theorizing is treated simply as a personal and social disease. Fortunately, the *Le Monde* authors initially seem to concede a pathologizing stance is politically dangerous, as they take umbrage at the very idea they would be involved in such a thing. By itself, this seems to represent a total retraction, a very welcome one. They will no longer participate in these manipulations of public thought. Unfortunately, this hope—at this time—vanishes as we read on.

**A Response to a Letter of Concern**

Matthew Dentith and I replied to the *Le Monde* statement in “Social Science’s Conspiracy Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone”. Our reply was reviewed and improved by other philosophers active in the field, as well as social scientists studying the same. All pointed to the obvious political perils of a psychologically sophisticated government “combating” conspiracy theories challenging the government, the questionable pathologizing assumption at the heart of the *Le Monde* piece and within much (but not all) social science on conspiracy theorizing. Now our colleagues feel the need to explain themselves.

The authors of the *Le Monde* statement have responded, Basham et al. (2016), fear that “they want to cure everyone” of conspiracy theories. Here, “they” respond and try to put this concern to rest. The sense of popular rejection may go some way to explaining the spirited tone of their response, and reinforce their commitment to pursuing the pathologizing project.

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commentary “they” published in French newspaper *Le Monde*, with which Basham et al. take issue, cautioned against governmental initiatives to counter conspiracy theories among youths.5

The *Le Monde* statement objected to government initiatives to counter conspiracy theorizing that are *ineffective*, and suggested social psychology could improve upon these, fighting the disease effectively. Our letter of concern cautioned against *government initiatives*, psychologically sophisticated or not, to counter conspiracy theorizing. The *Le Monde* authors continue,

“They”, in fact, are “just asking” some questions, which Basham et al. surely agree is always a good thing. Perhaps, by clarifying such and related issues, some pertaining to the conceptual and others to the empirical domains, one could get a better sense of how to address conspiracy theories, and even ascertain whether there is a problem at all.6

When they already view conspiracy theory as a disease, it is unlikely they are curious to discover if conspiracy theorizing is a disease or not, and so a problem or not. That ship has sailed. For them it is a pressing problem and they have moved onto the how to cure stage of the project. Accordingly, when the purposes of questions are highly suspect, we might wonder if asking such questions is always a good thing: The lethality of hydrogen cyanide, for instance. Questions, when in the service of bad motives, easily lend themselves to far worse answers and results. Immediately thereafter we are told, “Doing things right would benefit everybody: the authorities, social scientists, the kids targeted by the programs, and yes, society at large, including taxpayers.”.

What is intended by “doing things right”? And while we are “targeting kids”? And why target children in such a charged political context if not to direct their thoughts and behavior as adults? In the *Le Monde* statement what “doing things right” is explicit. It remains so in their response to critics: Entirely a matter of preventing the public from indulging the disease of conspiracy theorizing. The authors then present us their prize discovery: There is mass social disease, the “conspiracist mindset”. From this something that comes from seemingly nowhere conspiracy theory suspicions and beliefs are to be best explained. Of course, this strange theory is rather like arguing all Moslems are Osama bin Ladens in the waiting: Beware the “Islamic mindset”.

This pattern of “giving with one hand and taking back with the other” becomes familiar as we read through the response and indeed, study the entire literature. This logically contradictory oscillation appears defining of the pathologizing project in its relation to critics in our larger, democratic society. While historically literate people agree our governments have long resorted to conspiracy, we must pathologize those who note this and suggest it is

4 Dieguez et al’s peculiar scare-quote motif, “they”, appears throughout the *Le Monde* authors’ response. As Kurtis Hagen playfully quips, “Would it have been better if we had called them “it?”.

5 “They Respond”, 20.

6 Ibid, 20.
still occurring. When critics point to the problematic nature of the pathologizing assumption guiding their research, the authors briefly deny they are pathologizing anyone, then resorting to questionable studies, proceed to explain why conspiracy theorists are pathological. This invitation to double-think, a self-contradictory oscillation between explicitly pathologizing and silencing citizens who explore conspiracy explanations while denying as researchers they are doing this, but instead are “just asking questions”, appears to be the blue-print for their entire response.\(^7\)

**The Pathological Mindset Definition of “Conspiracy Theory”**

The *Le Monde* authors’ unusual definition of “conspiracy theory” lays bare the internal logic of the pathologizing project,

… [A] “conspiracy theory” is what the conspiracist mindset tends to produce and be attracted to, an apparently circular definition that rests on ongoing work but is firmly grounded in relevant research fields such as cognitive epidemiology [disease], niche construction and cognitively driven cultural studies, and could be refined or refuted depending on future results.\(^8\)

This is a typical pathologizing “enemy within our society” hypothesis. The difficulties appear numerous, so it is hard to know where best to begin. First, “firmly grounded” appears to simply mean, “firmly repeated”; the mindset theory has only been assumed, used as a template for interpretive distortions and never demonstrated to exist within our populace.

It is also an empirical nonstarter: Most all normal, rational people accept conspiracy theories for rational reasons, including contemporary ones like the US/UK WMD hoax. In the WMD hoax, evidence indicates a lion’s share of people did so far before mainstream media was forced to concede that we were being lied to and the media was the deception’s megaphone. People worked it out on their own.\(^9\) Further, if we view it as an actual definition, there’s nothing “apparently” circular about it, it is straightforwardly so, a logical nonstarter: Conspiracy theories are those theories created and believed by conspiracy theorists, victims of the “conspiracist mindset”, and victims of the conspiracy mindset are those irrational people who believe in conspiracy theories.

It also appears to be a case of confirmation bias, a self-fulfilling presupposition: If we insist on the “conspiracist mindset” story before reflecting on our fellow citizens, designing

\(^7\) It appears to be the public face of this latest of “cognitive hygiene” projects. The constant shuffle between disinterested science and social-political policy is revealing. The authors also refer to “cognitive epidemiology”, another medicalization and venue for public policy. Envision the future “Ministry of Cognitive Epidemiology and Health”, and all else follows.

\(^8\) “‘They’ Respond”, 30. This definition would render, for instance, croissants “conspiracy theories”, too, at least when conspiracy theorists make them or seek to eat them.

\(^9\) Later in the *Le Monde* authors’ response they inform us social psychology has established these same billion plus people are simultaneously certain Mr. Hussien secreted away vast stockpiles of WMD, an ideation on their part that speaks for itself.
questionnaires and interpreting responses only accordingly, we will only become more and more convinced of mass-pathology and the progress of our pathologizing project. If additional critique is needed, it lies again in the fact that all of us believe well-evidenced conspiracy theories, including the authors. So either very few of us suffer a “conspiracist mindset”, or there is nothing whatsoever pathological about it. Either very few people are subject to a “conspiracist mindset”, or almost every rational person is. Either way the “mindset” theory is reduced to one of trivial interest.

No surprise, in hundreds of interviews with rational people who explore and sometimes accept conspiracy explanations counter to mainstream media, the pattern observed is the same: Evidence for a conspiracy theory, suspicion others may be true, and an entirely appropriate openness to considering others. Sound familiar? It should. That’s virtually all of us.

**Going Pathological: The Social Science Literature**

What is the caliber of the pathologizing (“conspiracist mindset”) literature? Much data reported is interesting if expected. But then we come to the interpretation of results stage (“discussion”). Here things frequently fall apart. A full survey isn’t possible for reasons of space, but those of us not participating in the project are often struck by the implausible interpretations it indulges. For an extreme instance, the *Le Monde* authors rhetorically ask, “…why should it be the case that people merely interested in uncovering the lies of would-be tyrants by carefully gathering, evaluating and presenting the best evidence, would also turn out… [to] simultaneously endorse flatly contradictory conspiracy theories?”. The *Le Monde* authors’ reference is to Michael Wood, Karen Douglas and Robbie Jolly, “Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories” (2012) (hereafter, “Dead and Alive”). The *Le Monde* authors’ rhetorical question is a text-book case of the disqualify-silencing strategy. A more de-rationalizing, dehumanizing accusation against people who entertain and explore conspiratorial explanations is hard to imagine: Conspiracy theorists routinely, simultaneously believe obviously contradictory conspiracy theories? Rather surprising. But do they?

Fortunately, they do not. The accusation is an empirical non-starter. Instead these citizens are keenly aware of the contradictions between alternative explanations and work hard to evidentially resolve these impasses, much like any good detective or forensic scientist would. Even a cursory glance over the writings of conspiracy theorists many of us may find

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10 Weak correlations to rational attitudes like watchfulness of authorities, a sense of powerlessness, distrust of public information, a willingness to commit similar behavior if in power, and so on. All are rational responses to the evidenced-driven acceptance, or suspicion that, any given ambitious (not minor) political conspiracy theory is true.

11 Matthew Dentith, Peter Knight, Gina Husting, Martin Orr, Kurtis Hagen, David Coady, Jack Bratich and Charles Pigden, among a number of others.

12 “‘They’ Respond”, 31.


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disturbing and offensive, like those within the “inside job” 9/11 community, amply demonstrate this logical meticulousness. The contrasting recklessness of the authors’ accusation is a bit stunning, but not entirely, if we recall again the power of the “monological” (one explanation fits all) pathologizing belief system the authors have been limited to. Obviously something has gone wrong with this alleged demonstration. But what?

The Wood et al. paper remains a flag-ship of the pathologizing approach to conspiracy theorists by social psychology. I hasten to add I consider Wood and Douglas friends and gifted scientists. But while producing this paper they were operating within a culture defined by the pathologizing goals and assumptions we are questioning. It would be surprising if we expected them to deviate from these. They did not. Let’s look at a quick summary of their methods and their interpretation of results.

In the Osama bin Laden scenario participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (“definitely not true”) to 6 (“definitely true”), with a “somewhat” gradient 2, 3, 4 and 5 in between, the following,

1. Osama bin Laden was killed in the American raid [in Pakistan]. Rate 1-6.
2. Osama bin Laden is still alive. Rate 1-6.
3. When the raid took place, Osama bin Laden was already dead. Rate 1-6.
4. The actions of the Obama administration indicate that they are hiding some important or damaging piece of information about the raid. Rate 1-6.

Pencil in hand, suppose we rate (1) as “5” and circle it accordingly; we suspect the reports are fairly likely to be true. Next we rate (2) as “4”; we harbor some suspicions about the veracity of government reports. We are not entirely certain about these, especially in such a politically charged context. For instance, the body was reported to be disposed of at an undisclosed location but bin Laden’s capture, interrogation and even perhaps a trial seem like valuable options. Next, recalling numerous government and mainstream media reports that bin Laden was killed in Afghanistan, but his body could not be retrieved from the blasted caves of Tora Bora, we are also willing to entertain (3), so we circle “4” again. Coherent with the above, when we reach (4), we are content to circle “5” once more. Then we put our pencil down.

This, we are told, is the profile of a lunatic.

Notice we never report a settled belief. Wood et al’s interpretive mistake is so surprising because it is so clear. Simply, the researchers conflate participants’ reports of strong suspicions with settled beliefs. This is an easy way to contrive irrationality in anyone about almost anything. Imagine you have misplaced your key ring. You suspect you left it in the front door lock. You also suspect you left it in the kitchen. Given your previous behavior, you rate

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14 It’s nice to discover how much you have in common at lunch and a night on the town.
15 “Dead and Alive”, 4. Notice that (4) has profound implications for any ordinary person about the evaluation of 1, 2 and 3; these are reduced to speculations by it.
as quite probable, “agree” that it is in the front door and equally as probable, “agree”, the keys are in the kitchen. This is an entirely rational cognitive practice. But according to the interpretation of Wood et al., you believe your keys are located, at the very same moment, in both your front door and in your kitchen.

For those with lost-key beliefs, believing one has left the keys in the front door is apparently no obstacle to believing the keys are simultaneously in the kitchen. Clearly, those with lost-key beliefs are irrational. Also, it would seem, are scientists who given current evidence view likely but contrary explanations as equally probable. For instance, when scientists noted the cancer-driven decline of the Tasmanian Devil, they recognized that a biological pathogen or an artificially introduced carcinogen would equally well explain the animals’ plight. Given the evidence, both were quite probable. At that juncture only additional investigation could distinguish which hypothesis was more likely, in this case a viral pathogen. Ignoring the diversity and contrasting logical properties the propositional attitudes is the “slight of hand” here, however unintentional. This is strange for psychologists; but not when a pathology-hunt defines their research culture.

Wood et al. shelter their “Dead and Alive” conclusion from participants’ predictable protests, participants who could be any of us. They provide no opportunity for them to disambiguate what they mean by drawing circles “on a scale of 1-6”. That would no doubt undermine the suspicion is settled belief maneuver. They certainly don’t ask them, “Do you believe Osama bin Laden is simultaneously both dead and alive?” That would up-end the whole study, requiring heroic efforts to indict the participants of massive self-deception: They wouldn’t find many participants acknowledging they believe Osama bin Laden walks the earth while moldering in a watery grave, nor witness many participants gasp in astonishment when they discover the extremity of their mindset disorder. The thesis is a non-starter, unless, perhaps, when uttered in the halls of the pathologizing project. No clarification is allowed. Instead Wood et al. go behind the participants’ backs, reinterpreting the data in the most de-rationalizing way they can. While this is understandable in some research, here it is all too convenient.

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16 Perhaps a 5 or 6 on the authors’ 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 or 7 (strongly agree) point scale.
17 At times the Wood et al. retreat from explicit talk of “belief” to the ambiguous term “endorse”, which can be interpreted as either “belief” or “suspicion”, among other things. In “Dead and Alive” there is no occurrence of “suspicion” or similar language in the description of respondents, but ironically it does occur in their initial characterization of concerns over the handling of the bin Laden assassination, “Conspiracy theories alleging that bin Laden had not actually been killed in the raid immediately started to propagate throughout the Internet and traditional media, mostly. Proponents claimed that their suspicions were aroused by several actions of the Obama administration, including a refusal to release pictures of bin Laden’s body and the decision to bury him at sea shortly after the raid (emphasis added).” Yet subsequently, “…those who distrust the official story of Diana’s death do not tend to settle on a single conspiracist account as the only acceptable explanation…” So yes, they “have suspicions” concerning multiple mutually excluding explanations. But no logical contradictions can be derived from that.
18 This an instance of the broader “why don’t you just ask them?” problem plaguing this literature: People are treated as non-rational, malfunctioning automatons from start to finish.
The *Le Monde* authors’ claim that Wood et al. have scientifically established conspiracy theorists simultaneously believe flatly contradictory theories fails to inspire confidence in their standards of science.

Among a number of examples in the pathologizing literature, another seemingly transparent instance of forced and fallacious interpretation of data can be found in Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French, “Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Susceptibility to the Conjunction Fallacy”, *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 28 (2014), 238-248, esp. 238. The participants are not committing the conjunction fallacy. The probability of 2 conjuncts cannot be greater than the probability of either conjunct. The participants are reasoning to the best explanation for the facts presented. Consider one of Brotherton and French’s examples:

Josh is now on the verge of perfecting a device which will increase the fuel efficiency of any car by 500%.' The response options were (i) the CEOs of several major petrol companies hold a meeting in which they discuss the implications of Josh’s invention; (ii) Josh is found dead in his home before patenting the invention; and (iii) the CEOs of several major petrol companies hold a meeting in which they discuss the implications of Josh’s invention, and Josh is found dead in his home before patenting the invention.

The authors claim participants who rate (iii) as more likely than (i) or (ii) are irrational. But there is nothing irrational, let alone paranoid, in this cognitive practice; (iii) has greater explanatory power and unifies in a rational manner seemingly disconnected phenomenon. These are primary goals of both scientific and ordinary reasoning. The “and” in (iii) is naturally and rationally interpreted as causation, as in “the car crashed and caught on fire.” Since explanatory power and unification are positively correlated with rational acceptability and the truth, so until additional information and considerations are forthcoming, we should rate (iii) as more probable in this scenario than (i) or (ii), rationally interpreting the “and” as causation, just as any competent police investigator would. The pathologizing project blinds Brotherton and French to the obvious epistemic considerations, ones that also loom large in the empirical sciences. A verdict of “participants are rational” would, after all, have to follow. The authors brush this sort of devastating objection aside with a brief footnote, saying this issue is complex. But really, it’s not. Such troubling examples are endemic to the pathologizing literature, starting as it does with the universal, and apparently false, “conspiracist mindset” hypothesis.

These are two ordinary, not outlier, examples of the pathologizing project. Instead of science, a standard of forced and fallacious interpretations of results, as required by the pathologizing project, appears to be the guiding light of this literature, followed with almost unwavering allegiance across dozens of papers. This problem has been noted for several years.19 Need it continue to develop?

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19 In talks in the US, Nordic countries, Germany and Eastern Europe, these criticisms and others of the much of this literature have been met with surprising agreement by social psychologists. Perhaps this is what Marius Raab, in signing the letter of concern, “est alle faire dans cette galère”? See Riakka and Basham, “Conspiracy
Being Fair to Conspiracy Theorizing

The “conspiracist mindset” hypothesis is an effigy of conspiracy theorists, demonstrably distorting current research, supporting a project perfectly suited to disqualify, silence and socially disappear dissident citizens. But an anthropology of people who entertain conspiracy explanations—again, all of us—reveals a very different tale. We almost universally proceed from suggested hypothesis, evidence for or against, typically deploying sound inference, and reach rational conclusions; rejection, suspicion, acceptance or agnosticism. Sound familiar? It should. In the massive contemporary media flux, conspiracy allegations need evidence to gain the slightest notice, and in this competition, conflicts within or between accounts need to be resolved if this attention is to be sustained.

In our original letter of concern we wrote,

[The authors] believe people shouldn’t bother evaluating the evidence for or against, even though an evaluation of the evidence for or against really should be the end of the story. Rather, people are to be scientifically directed, somehow, to fixate on the cry of “That’s a conspiracy theory!,” flee the room, and not reflect on any facts.  

For the Le Monde authors, little seems to have changed. Indeed, their pathologizing stance seems not to have become more nuanced, but more aggressive.

History shows enemy-within “mindset” theories, applied to large swaths of society in charged political contexts, are almost certainly false. Yet they are politically useful reductions of thoughtful persons to “mindset pathogens”: Victims and carriers of a mental plague. It is unseemly and dangerous in the long run for governments to contrive—worse, “scientifically” contrive—to censor and disable their critics because government officials classify them as “conspiracy theorists”. Such a label is correctly applied to anyone who claims a group within the government is being intentionally deceptive about certain programs, actions or plans that it should not be.

There is also much cause for hope. We can be fair to conspiracy theorizing. This begins by approaching conspiracy theorists as rational persons, not inflicting designs and forced interpretations contrived to make them appear insane or variously deranged and dangerous. It rejects the broader “outlier” obsession of social psychology, and its application to conspiracy theorists. Of course, those who explore conspiracy explanations are not outliers unless we all are “outliers”; but then it follows none of us are. In the final paragraph, the authors propose a peace treaty. They will study only the non-rational components of conspiracy theorizing, and please leave us alone.  


20 “Conspiracy Panic”, 11.

21 “‘They’ Respond”, 39.
Dare to dream. Why should these researchers restrict themselves to such a narrow vision in a bid for social control? When hundreds of thousands were killed and continue to be killed in Iraq? A counter proposal: Good science. Seek out the rational elements, be careful not to be blinded by a pre-opted, establishmentarian pathologizing project, and see what we really can discover by pursuing all the cognitively relevant questions. Unbiased, good science. Jack Bratich insightfully summarizes conspiracy panics, “Conspiracy panics operate only via a series of contradictory analyses, self-delusional claims, even its own paranoid projections. They often operate in similar ways to the objects they problematize…seeking a figure for incrimination.”. Draped, as all conspiracy panics are, in establishmentarian politics and dubious analysis, this certainly appears to apply to our colleagues in the Le Monde statement and their subsequent defense of it. But the day is bright and the canvas wide. Conspiracy theorizing is not a disease. Social scientists increasingly recognize the “conspiracist mindset” story and its political pathologizing and silencing project are suspect, both as politics and science.

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22 Such unbiased rationality-testing research designs are now in the works with the help of accomplished social psychologists here in the US, Germany and Sweden.