



What Are They *Really* Up To? Activist Social Scientists Backpedal on Conspiracy Theory Agenda

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In a joint statement published in *Le Monde*, a group of social scientists called for more research on conspiracy theorists in order to more effectively “fight” the “disease” of conspiracy theorizing (see Basham and Dentith 2016, 17).¹ In response, a number of scholars, including myself, signed an open letter criticizing this agenda (Basham and Dentith 2016).² In response to us, the authors of the *Le Monde* statement (minus Karen Douglass) published a sprawling rebuttal entitled, “They’ Respond” (Dieguez *et al.* 2016). Matthew Dentith and Martin Orr have already offered their response in turn (2017), as has Basham (2017). I will here add my own. I will often refer to the scholars who authored the *Le Monde* statement, and the response to our objection to it, simply as “they.” I find this to be quite ordinary English, and, frankly, I think they have overreacted to our previous usage of this innocuous pronoun.

To keep this short, I will focus on just three issues: (1) They misrepresent their own previously stated intentions. (2) They misrepresent our critique of those intentions. (3) They fail completely in their attempt to show that, regarding the inappropriate pathologizing of conspiracy theorists, we are as guilty as they are. In restricting myself to these three issues I by no means wish to imply that the rest of their response was unproblematic.

The Misrepresentation of Their Own Original Position

So, what were they up to? The very title of the *Le Monde* statement makes it clear, “Let’s fight conspiracy theories effectively.” They worry that the “wrong cure might only serve to spread the disease” (see Basham and Dentith 2016, 17). The “disease,” of course, is conspiracy theorizing, which they conflate with “conspiracism,” expressing their desire to help “fight against this particular form of contemporary misinformation known as ‘conspiracism’” (17). In putting it this way, they reveal their bias: the presupposition that conspiracy theories are a form of misinformation. They believe that “the growth of conspiracy theories” is “a major problem” (17). And so, they aim to provide research that will help “remedy the problem” of “adherence to conspiracy theories” (18). This research is necessary, they reason, because “Conspiracism is indeed a problem that must be taken seriously” (17)—again conflating conspiracy theories with conspiracism.

It was this objective with which we took issue. But now, in response to our criticism, they have recast their position. Although they had originally characterized the intentions of governmental initiatives to undermine conspiracy theories as “laudable” (17), they now characterize their original *Le Monde* letter in the following ways:

¹ References are to an English translation of the *Le Monde* statement affixed to the end of Basham and Dentith 2016. (Page numbers to *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* articles refer to the PDF versions.)

² Regarding the original critique of the *Le Monde* statement (namely, Basham and Dentith 2016), it should be noted that while eight scholars, including myself, endorsed the critique, only two of us, Basham and Dentith, actually did the writing. Just to be perfectly clear, while I am proud to be associated with the critique, and refer to it as “our” response, I did not substantially contribute to it, other than offering some comments on a couple drafts. So, it seems to me perfectly sensible for it to be published as, and referenced as, “Basham and Dentith 2016,” giving credit where it is due.

[Our commentary] cautioned against governmental initiatives to counter conspiracy theories among youths and advocated for more research on the topic (Dieguez *et al.* 2016, 20).

[We] took issue with French governmental and local initiatives designed to tackle the apparent proliferation of conspiracy theories among youths (20–21).

Both of these statements are technically true, but quite misleading. These ways of putting it makes it sound as though they are *against* governmental initiatives to counter conspiracy theories. Reinforcing this impression, they go so far as to suggest that they are, in part, trying to “ascertain whether there is a problem [with conspiracy theories] at all” (21), and that they want to “help everybody become *better* conspiracy theorists” (20). Oh really? That is not at all the impression one gets from the *Le Monde* statement, as indicated above.

In reality, the original *Le Monde* statement was *not* cautioning against governmental initiatives to counter conspiracy theories. They expressed full support for that *objective*. They were merely cautioning against doing it without first funding more research³ (to be done by themselves),⁴ so that, armed with this research, the government could counter conspiracy theories *more effectively*. In our response we took issue with that objective. But now I am taking issue with something different. I’m taking issue with the way they, in their response to us, have misleadingly characterized their own previously expressed purpose.

Though they have attempted to recast their intentions, they have not fully retreated from activism. They say that they “thought...that something should be done” (21). About what? Why, about “ideological polarization... hate-speech and misinformation” (21). But who said anything about those things? It seems that a number of questions have suddenly been begged. Then, almost admitting what their original position had been all along, they worry that “early and hasty endeavours had the potential to misfire or simply be ineffective” (21). Endeavors to do what? Now they seem to be suggesting that they are for efforts to reduce hate speech and misinformation. But their original statement was about being ineffective in undermining conspiracy theories. Rather than straightforwardly defend *that* position, they equivocate between conspiracy theories and “ideological polarization... hate-speech and misinformation.”

Finally, after a ten-page exercise in distraction, they return to the central issue, under the heading, “A Cure?” Here, once again, they reframe their purpose in neutral terms. They write, “What ‘they’ had in mind, as must be clear by now, was to study how people, on their

³ Here is how they pitch it: “[The current] more or less random campaigns [to combat belief in conspiracy theories] are *expensive*, and *this investment is automatically taken from more methodical studies of the phenomenon*. It is therefore urgent that we launch widespread research programmes aimed at evaluating present educational initiatives rather than continuing to promote them” (Basham and Dentith 2016, 18, emphasis added).

⁴ Further, is it not a tad hypocritical of them to charge us with a “self-serving” (Dieguez *et al.* 2016, 22) interpretation while they are calling for more funding for research in which they would like to engage? But for critics of conspiracy theories, double standards are par for the course.

own or under some external influence, *think* and come to endorse some *beliefs* about such things” (Dieguez *et al.* 2016, 32, emphasis in original). They maintain that they just want to use objective science to answer questions such as whether a new “remedy is not needed after all, as the disease might be transitory, or even not a disease at all” (33). They continue, “Scientific research turns out to be the best currently available tool to answer such questions, and that’s where the analogy lies with programs devised to counter conspiracy theories.” It’s a curious position, if we are to take it seriously. They support “programs devised to *counter* conspiracy theories,” wanting to try to make such programs *more effective*, because, they seem to suggest, “Who knows? We might end up finding that there was no problem to begin with!” But how likely is it that biased researchers, funded by grants directed for a purpose that aligns with that bias, are going to produce findings that run directly counter to that purpose and so support the conclusion that no more such funding is warranted? No conspiracy theory is needed to recognize this as flawed, if not intellectually dishonest, approach.

The Misrepresentation of Our Critique

Naturally, since they misrepresented their original position, they needed to misrepresent our critique of it as well. And so they did. They did not focus directly on the substance of our actual critique, namely, that seeking to use what passes for “science” to assist the state in undermining belief in conspiracy theories (without concern to whether or not there is justification for those theories) is a bad idea. Instead, they attributed to us a number of positions that we never asserted. Then they produced a wide variety of points in response to these positions, some of which are unobjectionable, others quite problematic, but none directly germane to our central complaint.

For example, they suggest that our objection to their project involved the idea that “everything there is to know on the matter is in fact already known, and that any further attempt to investigate the topic would be a ‘grave intellectual, ethical and prudential error,’ or worse, a genocidal crime against the masses, destroying lives ‘by the thousands, even millions’” (21). Wow! Did we write anything as crazy as that? Or, more likely, is this a rather egregious misrepresentation of our critique? Let’s find out. While it is true that much of the social science research on conspiracy theorists is deeply flawed (as forthcoming articles will show in detail,⁵ and Basham 2017 explains more briefly), we did not even mention this in our objection to their proposal. We certainly did not claim that “any further attempt to investigate the topic” would be necessarily problematic. After all, we ourselves, in our own ways, investigate the topic. No. *That* was not the problem we were pointing out. Neither did we suggest, needless to say, that *merely investigating the topic* would destroy lives by the thousands or millions. So, what exactly *did* we write? We wrote this:

⁵ For example, a special issue of *Argumenta* on the ethics and epistemology of conspiracy theory will include articles by Matthew Dentith (“The Problem of Conspiracism”), Lee Basham (“Joining the Conspiracy”), and myself (“Conspiracy Theories and Monological Belief Systems”). In addition, “Conspiracy Theory Phobia,” by Juha Räikkä and Lee Basham, is forthcoming in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (Oxford University Press), edited by Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent.

Political conspiracy theorizing in Western-style democracies should not be restricted, because to do so is a grave intellectual, ethical, and prudential error. As such, the declaration by respected scholars like these is likewise a grave intellectual, ethical and prudential error (Basham and Dentith 2016, 15).

So, quite plainly, we were not saying that any investigation would be inappropriate. We were saying that there should not be an effort to restrict (it would have been better to have said “undermine”) political conspiracy theories. *That* is what would be the “intellectual, ethical, and prudential error.” And, remember, that is precisely the goal that the *Le Monde* authors were originally supporting, though they are now, in their response, not straightforwardly admitting.

We continued, writing:

Conspiracy theory saves lives, by the thousands, even millions, if we would let it. Its automatic dismissal leaves blood on our hands (16).

What were we talking about? Certainly *not* that merely investigating the topic would result in untold carnage. Perhaps our explanation bears repeating:

High-placed political conspiracies of lesser ambition often lie behind the political catastrophes of recent history. Very recent. For example, the catastrophe of the invasion of Iraq comes to mind. There is little doubt in the public or scholars that NATO, and many other governments, were intentionally misled and manipulated into this war, particularly by the U.S. government. This truth, well-evidenced at the time of grave decision, was silenced as an “outrageous conspiracy theory” by heads of state, mainstream media and yes, certain members of academia. Thus, a war that ultimately led to the death of hundreds of thousands, and a desperate global refugee crisis, was powerfully enabled by an anti-conspiracy theory panic. One that these scholars would seem to like to embrace and nurture as general policy (14).

We gave other examples as well. So, quite plainly, we were saying that it is engaging in an effort to disable a mechanism for thwarting potentially disastrous conspiracies that “leaves blood on our hands,” not merely investigating the topic. Further, let me be emphatically clear about this: they were *not* originally advocating investigating the topic in a fair and neutral way. They have a clear bias (they assume that conspiracy theories are a disease that needs to be cured), and they have an explicit agenda, namely, to “fight conspiracy theories effectively.”

Now, I am not opposed to activism, and there is nothing inherently wrong with having an agenda. Indeed, I have an agenda in writing this. I am making a case for what I believe to be true, and defending what I think is important. But here is the crucial difference: I am not pretending to be a neutral scientist, objectively collecting the data and letting it speak for

itself. These scholars, on the other hand, do claim to be in precisely that business. Perhaps that is why they have a hard time admitting their agenda. And so, having been called out for their agenda, they are now trying to claim that all they wanted to do was to dispassionately and scientifically investigate the topic. They are “just asking questions” (28; cf., 20, 21) and gathering data, they claim.⁶ But they are not convincing. As shown above, that position is refuted by their own words in their original statement.

They also claim that we “call... for more conspiracy theories and less ‘conspiracy theory panic’” (20). Here they are half right. It seems fair to say that we are against “conspiracy theory panic,” but it is silly to say we want “more conspiracy theories.” For my part, I would say that I want fairness toward conspiracy theories (a desire also expressed by Basham 2017). I do not want to see the state allied with biased social scientists for the purpose of producing research designed to help the state undermine legitimate conspiracy theorizing. But that is not the same as calling “for more conspiracy theories,” as if we think that the more conspiracy theories in circulation the better, regardless of their merits. No. We were calling out those who would use “science” to try to undermine a legitimate and important activity.

In addition, they also suggest that we accused them of being part of a conspiracy (30). But we did *not* maintain that they were *secretly* up to something morally dubious. Their morally dubious agenda was *openly* articulated in a public forum. However, given their bizarre response, it now seems that they are retrospectively trying to pretend that they were up to something different from what they clearly and repeatedly stated originally. But I, speaking just for myself, do not maintain that they *plotted* any of this. No, in this case, I favor a cock-up theory.

Pathologizing Conspiracy Theorists

Another central concern that we raised was their pathologizing of conspiracy theorizing, suggesting that conspiracy theories are a “disease” (Basham and Dentith 2016, 17). Basham 2017 addresses this issue more broadly. I’ve chosen here to focus narrowly on reasoning errors in their attempt to vindicate themselves by suggesting that we are equally guilty of the same offence. They accused us of inconsistency since we oppose the *generic* pathologizing of conspiracy theories and yet some of us had, on their reading, pathologized certain *particular* conspiracy theories. Hmm. Actually, even if they had read us correctly (which in at least one case they have not), there is nothing inconsistent about that.

Since I was one of those accused of this supposed inconsistency, and since they have indeed

⁶ They write, “So, what were ‘they’ up to? Quite simply, ‘they’ advocated for more research. ‘They’ figured that, before ‘fighting’ against, or ‘curing’, conspiracy theories, it would be good to know exactly what one is talking about. Are conspiracy theories bad? Are they good? Are they *always* bad, are they *always* good? ... ‘They’, in fact, are ‘just asking’ some questions” (Dieguez *et al.* 2016, 21). Once again, this is a clearly misleading representation of what they were up to. They now ask in a neutral voice, “Are conspiracy theories bad?” Yet they had already answered this when they described belief in conspiracy theories as a disease and conflated it with “contemporary misinformation known as ‘conspiracism’” (Basham and Dentith 2016, 17). Have they truly turned over a new leaf? If so, why not be honest about what they had originally said?

misread me, I'll use their critique of my work to set both matters straight. Specifically, they accuse me of "delegitimiz[ing]" Roswell conspiracy believers (Dieguez *et al.* 2016, 26). Neither did I intend to do that nor would it have been in any way significant if I had. Here is what I wrote:

[Sunstein and Vermeule's] deliberate intent to be dismissive becomes unambiguously apparent. Immediately after the mention of Operation Northwoods they write: "In 1947, space aliens did, in fact, land in Roswell, New Mexico, and the government covered it all up. (Well, maybe not.)" This trivializes a whole list of significant conspiracies that they could not but admit were real, though the list could have been much longer (Hagen 2011, 13).

I was objecting to an obvious appeal to ridicule and inappropriate trivialization of agreed upon facts by throwing in a widely disbelieved example, accompanied with a snarky comment. As for my own position on the issue of alien visitations in general, and the Roswell incident in particular, I have no firm opinion, as I have not studied these issues in any depth (interesting though they are).

The point of the claim that I delegitimized Roswell conspiracy believers is that I had thereby, presumably, engaged in the pathologizing of a *particular* group of conspiracy theorists, as others in our group are likewise accused. This is a problem, they think, because we were critical of their attempt to pathologize conspiracy theories *in general*.

There are multiple layers of problems with their analysis. To begin with, as I have just explained, I had not even claimed that Roswell conspiracy believers were wrong, or that their belief is poorly evidenced. I did not take a position on that, and I have none. But even if I had, it would not follow that I pathologized them. Asserting that someone's position is wrong, or is not well evidenced, does not suggest that the person is defective. But that *is* what the *Le Monde* scholars seek to do. They aim to describe a presumed-to-be-defective conspiracist "mindset" (Basham and Dentith 2016, 18; Dieguez *et al.* 2016, 20, 23-25, 29-30, 34). And they advertise that their studies will help make efforts to undermine conspiracy theories more effective.

Their project is a delegitimizing one. Ours is not. And further, even if I had pathologized a *particular group* of conspiracy theorists, that would not mean I had acted hypocritically in criticizing the *Le Monde* scholars for pathologizing conspiracy theorists *in general*. (After all, while it is wrong to generically pathologize Atheists, Republicans, or Norwegians, that does not mean there are no individuals in those groups who may legitimately be regarded as, in some sense, pathological.) At minimum, pathologizing conspiracy theorists in general is an instance of *inappropriate* pathologizing, since believing in conspiracy theories is not necessarily, or even typically, pathological—even *if* there are particular instances that are

(about which I have taken no position). In sum, their argument goes wrong at every turn. No wonder they value “data” and disparage reason.⁷

Conclusion

If these scholars want to help move the dialog forward, they must respond in a way that does not mischaracterize what they had originally said, and mischaracterize the critique of what they said. (It would be nice if they did not get so much else wrong besides, but perhaps that cannot be helped.) Indeed, their response so far further undermines confidence in their ability to conduct fair and reasonable studies of conspiracy theorists, or on any subject for that matter. And thus their response calls into question the wisdom of their original proposal, even if its objective had been defensible, which even they seem unwilling to defend. Mere incantations of the holy words “science” and “data” will not turn invalid arguments into valid ones, nor remove the stain of flagrant misrepresentation.⁸

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⁷ They contrast data, data collection, experimental designs, and empirical research with “armchair” reasoning and various derogatory versions of the same (Dieguez *et al.* 2016, 22, 25, and 32).

⁸ I would like to thank Lee Basham and Matthew Dentith for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this response.