“Who Watches the Watchers’ Watchers?”

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A Review of **Joseph E. Uscinski, ed.:** ***Conspiracy Theories & The People Who Believe Them*****,**
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The academic study of the causes and consequences of conspiracy theorising—what some call “conspiratology”—is not a new phenomenon. Philosopher Karl Popper (*The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 1945), liberal historian Richard Hofstadter (*The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 1965), and conservative historian Daniel Pipes (*Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, 1997) helped pioneer the study of conspiracy beliefs (henceforth “conspiracism”) during the last century. Some of the conclusions they shared was that conspiracism is largely the fruit of radical ideologies, paranoid sentiments, xenophobia and a lack of healthy skepticism, and that the average believer in secretive plots is most likely male, mediocre, and mentally deranged. Such conclusions have recently come under fire by a new crop of academics, many of whom argue that Popper *et al.*’s “pathologizing model” is in need of revision. The explanatory strength of this model and whether or not it need be replaced are subjects political scientist Joseph Uscinski has spent much of the last decade assessing. It is also one of the central issues debated in his recent collection of essays: *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*.

In their fresh and authoritative 2015 study of conspiracism, *American Conspiracy Theories*, Joseph Uscinski and fellow political scientist Joseph Parent argued using extensive empirical data that there appears not to be such a thing as a typical conspiracist: conspiracy beliefs can take root among any race or age group, sex, political affiliation, and religious creed. While the *type* of conspiracy theories one espouses is largely determined by one’s politics, religion, or race, the *intensity* of these beliefs and the *historical moment* at which such beliefs flare and wane is largely determined by that person’s feelings of powerlessness in reaction to “power asymmetries” in political partisanship.[1] In other words, they argue, when one’s relative weight in the political game appears to be shrinking—usually after the political party or presidential candidate one supports gets locked out of power—one is most likely to seek conspiracist explanations for these unsavory results. This perceived loss of power also influences the way one interprets troubling events and conditions like the assassination of JFK, the 9/11 attacks, the 2008 financial meltdown, the growing disparity between rich and poor, and even strange lights in the sky. It is this thesis—that “conspiracy theories are for losers”[2]—that motivated a throng of conspiratologists to gather in Miami in 2015 to partake in a conference organized by Professor Uscinski and to contribute to his latest volume.

Structure of the Book

This book is dense and addressed to an educated readership, but not overly difficult for the layman to navigate. It contains 31 ten-to-twenty-page chapter-essays authored by forty different contributors, each of which can be read in one sitting. Two of these are authored by Uscinski, along with seven section introductions. The others are written by fellow academics and one journalist drawn from the fields of political science, history, psychology, sociology, religious studies and analytic philosophy.

The book opens with two introductory essays: the first by Uscinski on conspiracy theories in the age of Trump, the second by Michael Butter and Peter Knight, titled “The History of Conspiracy Theory Research”. The rest of the book is broken into seven sections akin to the expert panels one finds at a typical academic conference, each addressing one of the following questions: “What is a conspiracy theory?”, “How do conspiracy theorists and non-conspiracy theorists interact?”, “Are conspiracy theories ‘anti-science’?”, “What is the psychology of conspiracy theorizing?”, “What do conspiracy theories look like in the United States?”, “What do conspiracy theories look like around the world?”, and “How should we live with conspiracy theories?”

Theories and Models

A useful starting point for a reader new to conspiratology is chapter 2, Butter and Knight’s cogent assessment of the four principal models for analysing conspiracy theories. The first is the psychological approach—a modified version of the contested “pathologizing model”—which remains popular among historians faithful to Popper and Hofstadter and to social psychologists interested in personality types, social anxiety, social mistrust, persecutory delusions, and schizotypy—the spectrum of psychological experiences that range from normality to full blown dissociative states.(247) This perspective is best summarized by psychologists Michael Wood and Karen Douglas in “Conspiracy Theory Psychology” (chapter 16), and by historian Kathryn Olmsted’s “Conspiracy Theories in U.S. History” (chapter 19) whose approach is cautiously sympathetic to Hofstadter's system, albeit more politically nuanced.[3] Though psychological stress is not the sole cause of conspiracy belief, these authors explain, it is the suspicious person’s *perception* of being deceived—not the actual power dynamics in their political institutions—that leads them to mistrust epistemic authorities (i.e., the recognizable experts who produce and defend “official” narratives) and feeds their psychological need for self-affirming alternative narratives. Olmsted concedes that politics do play a large role in conspiracy ideation but largely as a response to apparent corruption or lack of transparency by the elites. The more a government’s actual track record of conspiring becomes exposed (think Watergate or Iran-Contra) the more conspiracy theories about the government will flourish, whether or not evidence of such plots exists.(294) Sociologist Ted Gertzel ("The Conspiracy Theory Pyramid Scheme," chapter 15) and psychologist Nicholas DiFonzo ("Conspiracy Rumor Psychology," chapter 17) echo similar concerns: conspiracism is a weapon of "psychological self-defense"(259) reinforced by rhetorical devices or "memes"(226) that include exaggeration, scapegoating, wilful ignorance, and other mental gymnastics used by believers to protect their fragile ego. These authors point out that conspiracism is a group effort: a "social system of interacting persons"(257) seeking acceptance and emotional safety at the expense of accepting unexamined, and hence often inaccurate, facts.

Another approach is the cultural studies model popularized in recent decades by political scientist Michael Barkun[4] and Knight and Butter themselves[5]. It is best represented in this volume by religious studies scholars David Robertson and Asbjørn Dyrendal ("Conspiracy Theories and Religion," chapter 28). This approach proposes that conspiracy theories are a populist form of "stigmatized knowledge"(418)[6], like esoteric and apocalyptic religious myths adapted to serve a secular post-modern culture.(411; 415) As with some religious beliefs, "many Americans engage with conspiracy theories in self-conscious and ironic fashion, treating them 'as if' they were true, rather than fully believing in them."(41) In staking "his truth" in an evolving "alternative story", the conspiracist-as-prophet is making an existential commitment—an act of faith or rebellion—that grounds his identity as a protagonist in a larger, cosmic battle between good (himself) and evil (the reigning epistemic orthodoxy). Despite the gruesome plots conspiracists often popularize—death panels, blood libels, assassination squads and the like—the conspiracy theory, because it is hyper-rational and simplified, offers a more satisfying explanation for the problem of evil than the haphazard histories found in academic textbooks, news bulletins, and traditional religious texts. It is for such reasons that conspiracist movements often resemble "prophetic" religious communities (as opposed to more priestly traditions) and that a conspiracist's enlightenment, so "often portrayed as a kind of gnosis", is a mystical and intuitive form of knowledge affirmed by conviction—i.e., faith—and not evidence *per se*.(418-9).

A third approach, the one that dominates this book and which now permeates social science research on conspiracism, is the quantitative approach popularized by Uscinski and Parent. Its adherents harvest data from surveys, opinion polls, demographics and voting behavior to show how power asymmetries, group dynamics, political partisanship and similar social forces give rise to conspiracism in the media, government institutions, and public discourse. These are discussed in Uscinski's essays "Down the Rabbit Hole We Go" (chapter 1), "What is a Conspiracy Theory?" (Section I introduction), and "Conspiracy Theories for Journalists" (chapter 31)—which reproaches the kneejerk tendency many journalists have to pathologize eccentric opinion-holders. The quantitative approach has recently helped contextualize the fluctuating popularity of conspiracy theories among political "losers", namely 9/11 Truthers and anti-

Obama Birthers. But it has more difficulty explaining why political "winners" like Nixon, Trump, or Stalin sometimes remain staunchly conspiracy-minded. Many chapters pick up where Uscinski and Parent's *American Conspiracy Theories* left off, sometimes at the cost of repetitiveness but also providing fresh insights into the effects of the struggle for power by various "losers". Political scientists Adam Enders and Steven Smallpage's "Polls, Plots, and Party Politics" (chapter 20) offers a succinct paraphrase of Uscinski's previous work and is a good place to start for readers new to this approach. More original propositions are found in the essays of political scientists Alfred Moore ("On the Democratic Problem of Conspiracy Politics," chapter 7), Matthew Atkinson and Darin Dewitt ("The Politics of Disruption," chapter 8), and Morgan Marietta and David Barker ("Conspiratorial Thinking and Dueling Fact Perception," chapter 14). Moore observes for instance that conspiracy claims in the political arena are often "a matter of style and rhetoric" that "does not turn on the question of whether those propagating conspiracy claims actually *believe* them."(112) Strategic conspiracy politics is often harmless, he notes, but it can also produce a "self-fulfilling prophecy of distrust" that impedes bi-partisan compromises and poisons public discourse.(117-9) Atkinson and DeWitt also demonstrate that political "losers" in a bipartisan democracy like the U.S. "have strong incentives to disrupt the existing political arrangements by changing the game," and this can most easily be done trafficking in malicious conspiracy claims.(124) Thus have Newt Gingrich, Maxine Waters, and Donald Trump, among others, acted as "entrepreneurs of disruption," using conspiracist language to undermine rivals. Marietta and Barker further observe that conspiracy talk is shaped by the broader problem of "dueling fact perceptions" (DFPs)—a sort of political teenage contrarianism that also creeps up in non-conspiracy-laden debates about the national debt, sexual orientation, terrorism, and racism.(215) These authors concur that conspiracy theories are an unavoidable part of the U.S. political landscape given its history as a bipolar democracy, a world superpower, and its long tradition of libertarianism and skepticism. But that does not mean they are wholly innocuous, as such theories can provoke outbursts of politically-motivated violence (think Timothy McVeigh) and risky behaviour (the avoidance of childhood vaccines). They should therefore be assessed carefully in terms of their social cost. This is where an essay by psychologist Jan-Willem Van Proojen ("Empowerment as a Tool to Reduce Belief in Conspiracy Theories", chapter 30) proves enlightening in its observation that greater government transparency and public consultation in states like the Netherlands have lowered levels of political alienation and conspiracy chatter, even among groups who are chronically locked out of power.

The fourth approach—which I found problematic—is the analytical model pioneered by philosopher Charles Pigden's critique of Karl Popper's anti-conspiracism.[7] It is showcased here in essays by philosophers Matthew Dentith ("Conspiracy Theories and Philosophy," chapter 6), Juha Räikkä and Lee Basham ("Conspiracy Theory Phobia," chapter 11), and Brian Keeley ("The Credulity of Conspiracy Theorists," chapter 29). This school of thought holds that, like scientific inquiry, conspiracy theories have an identifiable causal logic that makes them "a healthy and natural form of skepticism". They are hence a legitimate body of claims that should not "*prima facie"* be considered irrational.(Keeley, 422-7) The very terms "conspiracy theorist" and "conspiracism", argue Räikkä and Basham, are pejorative labels used to evoke pathology and to shut down debate about official historical narratives. "Rightly constituted epistemic authorities"[8] can also be wrong. This, strangely, leads them to wonder why "too many people *reject* conspiracy theories."(178)[9]

Similarly, Matthew R. X. Dentith (who cutely refers to himself as 'MR. X'), rightly points out that real conspiracies occur frequently. From this he concludes—less convincingly—that "the idea that we should not at least consider conspiracies as potential explanations for certain kinds of events means we are downplaying the role evidence plays in our reasoning. […] We use examples of failed conspiracies to infer that conspiracies typically fail. […Yet] we are faced with the problem of not knowing how many successful conspiracies have occurred."(98)[10] We should therefore refrain, he argues, from making any generalizations about conspiracy theories and theorists, and focus strictly on each one's "particular evidential merits".(94-5) It is reasonable of course to worry that certain voices do not receive a proper hearing, but it is a very different matter to regard the privileging of one interpretation over alternatives as *de facto* morally objectionable. Should we, for example, investigate *all* extra-terrestrial sightings before we can conclude that they are the product of some form of confirmation bias? Indeed, academic research constantly requires us to make generalizations, which inevitably involves the marginalisation, exclusion, and rejection of theories that display faulty methods and truncated logic, make disproven or unfalsifiable claims, or are promoted by demonstrably untrustworthy sources (think Andrew Wakefield).[11] And since time and resources are habitually limited, academics and journalists must inevitably ignore certain categories of conspiracy claims (e.g., that the earth is flat) without paying them due diligence. As for Dentith's claim that any given conspiracy theory is initially plausible on the basis that there is a large number of potentially true but still unexposed conspiracies waiting to be discovered, this appears to be an *ad ignorantiam* fallacy. An appropriate counter-analogy can be found in the tale of the boy who cried wolf. Having falsely cried wolf umpteen times, the boy does not retain his credibility on the grounds that thousands of possible wolves still lurk in the forest. Rather, we would expect that his fraudulent shouts, no matter how earnest he might be this time, have ruled him out as a trustworthy signaler. We should of course make *particular* judgements about the trustworthiness of the sources and theories we assess, but that does not mean that these can't also be judged by the *patterns* they share with other (disproven) theories. The analytic model's defense of conspiracism thus appears to be standing on rather thin ice.

Another problem with this approach is its anti-stigmatizing alarmism concerning what Dentith calls "the prohibition of even talking about conspiracy theories seriously" which, he writes, "leads to the *othering* of political voices."(99)[12] We should of course, be vigilant not to indulge in pathologizing or stereotyping those who hold rival opinions. Yet I question whether these authors would fret at the "*othering*" of those who systematically package malicious gossip, racist diatribe, anti-Semitism, or erratic nonsense under the label of "history". By defining "conspiracy theory" too broadly, this school of thought is—perhaps inadvertently—awarding a hall pass to a large number of theories and theorists who unquestionably *should* be "othered" by those academics who know better. Consider the "magic bullet theory" featured in Oliver Stone's film *JFK*, one of the grossest misrepresentations of the body of evidence surrounding President Kennedy's murder. No knowledgeable expert could agree that this theory promotes "healthy and natural" discussions about the past. In fact, it only muddied the waters of history. Butter and Knight seem to concur by suggesting that this model's proponents use arguments that are overly theoretical and grammatical, use too few concrete examples of successful conspiracy theorizing, and fail to delve deeply enough into the complex array of historical, geopolitical, and psychological forces that give rise to conspiracy thinking.(39)

Strengths and Weaknesses

The greatest strengths of this book are its successful attempt to create a dialogue between the various branches of conspiratology, and its efforts to move us beyond pejorative interpretations of conspiracy theories as the narcotic of a few quacks. One of the greatest weaknesses of this book, in my view, is that it offers nebulous and sometimes contradictory definitions of what a conspiracy theorist is. Should we limit our focus to the leaders of opinion who produce, publish and popularize conspiracy claims in the media, or should every street urchin with a passing suspicion that they're being followed be thrown into the centrifuge? Should we include in our studies those who traffic in conspiracy claims to get rich, or those who maliciously use them as mere political weapons, or only hard and true believers? Should those who occasionally indulge in conspiracist gossip without letting their lives be affected receive equal billing to those whose paranoid delusions lead them to break all relations with unbelievers? Much like the answer to the question "do Catholics oppose abortion?", which largely depends on which persons one finds sufficiently Catholic, the way the above questions get answered may greatly affect the conclusions we reach about whether or not conspiracism is an existential problem, a mild social irritant, or a boon to democracy. This lack of a consensus on what conspiracy theorists are may help explain why the four models discussed above arrive at such different conclusions concerning the risks conspiracy theories pose to an open society, and whether they are a legitimate form of public discourse or the nightmares of troubled minds.

The book could have also included some other voices—namely from the psychiatric, legal, and forensic professions—or considered the impact of conspiracism in deeply divided societies like Chile and Northern Ireland, or even some thoughts on conspiracy theories like JFK, 9/11, and Ufology (in contrast to theories about Obama and Trump, climate change, and vaccines, which herein received far more attention). But then, the book is sufficiently long as it is, and such issues could justifiably spawn Uscinski's next oeuvre.

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[1] Uscinski and Parent. 2014. *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford University Press, 132-3.

[2] Ibid. 22.

[3] It was Hofstadter who coined the now-clichéd phrase "the paranoid style" to describe what he saw as an irrational, xenophobic, millennialist and mostly right-wing mindset that had taken hold of the Republican Party during the Fifties and early Sixties. Hofstadter. 1966. *'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' and Other Essays*. Alfred A. Knopf, vii-40. Hofstadter's thesis has experienced a renaissance since 9/11 due to the many journalists and researchers who use it to describe perceived episodes of mass hysteria.

[4] Barkun. 2003. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, University of California Press.

[5] Knight. 2001. *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*. Routledge; Butter. 2014. *Plots, Designs, and Schemes: American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present*. De Gruyter.

[6] The phrase is Barkun's. See note #4.

[7] E.g, Pigden. 1995. "Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 25(1):3-34. Popper introduced the phrase "conspiracy theory of society" to describe the simplistic historical narratives of Marxists and Fascists according to whom all significant historic events are the fruit of a secretive and hyper-competent cabal (i.e., "the Bourgeoisie" or "the Jews"). Popper. 1945. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2. Routledge.

[8] Usciniski and Parent (op.cit., 47-51) borrowed this phrase from Neil Levy ("Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories," *Episteme* 4(2):181-192, 2007) to refer to the "impartial spectators" who are better equipped than the layman to evaluate the strength and pertinence of evidence. Räikä and Basham (also responding to Levy) appear to be citing them incorrectly, defining "epistemic authorities" as those who are popularly "recognized" as such (e.g., mainstream journalists or government officials) rather than by the fact that they are *qualified experts* (e.g., a wound ballistics pathologist) irrespective of what public opinion thinks of them. This appears to be an equivocation fallacy.

[9] While Räikä and Basham claim that "in the social sciences we can say the pathologizing approach is largely institutionalized,"(186) I doubt most researchers familiar with this literature would agree that this pathologizing tone is still systemic, or even frequent. They also fail to identify any of the "many scholars and journalists" (178) they hold responsible for this.

[10] Keeley, Räikkä and Basham echo similar concerns.

[11] See Quassim Cassam. 1919. *Conspiracy Theories*. Polity; Joseph Heath. Dec. 5, 2016. "What makes someone a conspiracy theorist?" *In Due Course*. http://induecourse.ca/what-makes-someone-a-conspiracy-theorist/. Wakefield was the author of the (now-debunked) theory that childhood vaccines cause autism.

[12] I am not aware of any *prohibitions* limiting academics—nor anyone else—from publicizing conspiracy theories, even rather far-fetched ones. Indeed, there is a long list of academics who have indulged in doing just that. True, they are often prevented from publishing these essays in peer-reviewed journals (and occasionally lose their tenure), but not because they are conspiracy theorists *per se*, but because their assertive allegations lack sound justification—a dominant trend in much "conspiracy research".