

Do not believe it: the genesis of conspiracy theory

Abstract

This text recalls the increased use of the phrase conspiracy theory, attempts to clarify the genesis of such theories, and explores the implications for society of the spectrum of emotions they evoke.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, psychology of conspiracy theory, believing, genesis, information

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Introduction

This text is largely the result of the exhibition “To Believe or Not to Believe: Conspiracy Theories” presented at the House of Histories in Vilnius. Drawing on the content of this exhibition and illustrating the text with its examples, it analyses the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Given the indiscriminate use of the term over the last four years, it is worth looking at how the dictionary defines it. The word conspiracy means “a secret plan by a group of people to do something harmful or unlawful”, thus conspiracy theory is defined as the belief that a certain situation is the result of such a plan. Once the definitions are known, it is possible to analyze the general origin of conspiracy theories, the dissatisfaction of a certain section of people with the theories, and their psychological meaning.

Main questions

Methods

The methods of analysis of published articles and observation have been chosen for the study of the topic. The main ideas and important points of the articles are highlighted and juxtaposed with the results of the author’s findings.

Motives

Let’s start with the origin of conspiracy theory. As the dictionary definition states, first an event is needed. However, a theory is not born because a powerful organization has contributed to the event by various means, in secret. A theory is born when the participation in the event, the number of press reports about it, raises doubts or suspicions about the outcome of the event presented, its causes or the information given about it. What matters here is that spark of distrust, suspicion, the quest for truth and clarity. All of these features are the result of a long historical development.

The reasons for the emergence of conspiracy theories as a phenomenon are somewhat different from the reasons for believing in them. There are many articles on this very subject, and I will mention one of them. The article “Psychology of conspiracy theories” suggests three main reasons of believing in such theories: epistemic, existential and social.¹ They are driven by motives of maintaining a positive image of oneself or group, being in control of one’s environment and understanding it. Lewandowsky argues otherwise in his texts, claiming that anxiety or dissatisfaction is the reason behind conspiratorial thinking.² Created theories make the world seem controllable, tamed,

processable within a pattern. And he claims that the reason of using conspiracy theories is the subverted dominance of powerless group. The overall implicit picture is of a group of people who have no place in the sun and who compensate for various psychological problems by creating unsubstantiated and fanciful theories.

It is now appropriate to mention the part of the population that is dissatisfied with the presence of conspiracy theories. The content of the aforementioned exhibition “To Believe or Not to Believe: Conspiracy Theories” can safely be counted among this group. From the game that greeted the visitor at the beginning of the exhibition to the last “exhibits”, it was made clear to the visitor that believing in conspiracy theories is unreasonable, foolish and unprogressive. This was also the tone of the flimsy texts, the coarse descriptions, the lack of information, the more narrative presentation of the theory and the swift cutting off of the fact that it had not been proven. There was no presentation of the information that had been proven, or of the real truth that had reached the organizers of the exhibition. This was also the approach used in the still heated topic of JFK’s death: a theory that was floating around was told and then written down as unsubstantiated. The organizers of the exhibition did not delve into the psychological reasons for the emergence and belief in conspiracy theories.

As Holger Lahayne³ has written, the exhibition presents a one-way narrative, all conspiracy theories are “debunked” and encouraged not to be believed. In order to avoid collapsing the carefully arranged order, not a single proven conspiracy theory was presented, which would have added dynamism to the show. The author also comments constructively on the theories surrounding the events of recent years. These include, of course, the coronavirus ‘pandemic’ and the climate change furore. It is clear that the curators of the exhibition have based their descriptions on old information, which is shrouded in one truth. There is not a single mention of the classified vaccine sales documents and contracts that have come to light, nor of the laboratory origin of the coronavirus. On climate change, too, only the comments of the activist Greta and the opinions of unnamed scientists were used.

To reinforce the impression that conspiracy theories are unfounded, the exhibition juxtaposed the Colorado potato beetle attack (a potato pest that had previously never been seen in the Baltic States during the Soviet era), 5G connectivity, the coronavirus “pandemic”, climate change and the 9/11 conspiracy theories. The last room of the exhibition rebuffed with malicious, disparaging comments. Perhaps that is why people did not express their opinion about the exhibition

and did not dare to admit that they are characterized by suspicion, a search for truth, an intuitive distrust of the authorities. This is what I missed from the exhibition, whose catalogue states that everyone has the right to believe or disbelieve in theories and that the search for truth is highly encouraged. I missed it because the exhibition already shapes the viewer's opinion to disbelieve, even though the refutation of a theory in all cases resembles a statuesque bullying in order to belittle the other. The pursuit of truth is also discouraged, because in the case of none of the 'disproven theories' is the correct, true version presented.

This is where we get to the important emotions that conspiracy theories evoke. A common response to them is to seek to belittle the dissenting voice, to denigrate the other opinion. At this point, it is bold to assume that the part of society that is involved in the creation of theories, in rethinking them, is historically more developed, not inclined to believe in one official version, that sees deceit, deception, in order to reveal the truth (the remedy for all regimes). However, the article "Psychology of conspiracy theories" associates' belief in these theories with lack of analytical thinking and lower level of education.¹ The article also argues that believing in conspiracy theories is motivated by defensiveness of available/given information and critical thinking. Thus, contrary to the article, the other part of society, which categorically denies the theories, and charades them, is in fact using a kind of psychological block to keep its worldview unchanged. This defensive manoeuvre must prevent any questioning, any deeper searching, any rethinking of existing knowledge, and the inherent trait of human beings not to admit error.

Discussion

Many conspiracy theories cannot be evaluated for the core facts are not revealed to the public, the ongoing events still have a great impact on state and ideological narratives, and it takes time, not passion, to evaluate each theory. The vast majority of conspiracy theories will never be publicly acknowledged or confirmed, even though they are characterized by reasonable doubt. After all, disagreeable opinions, inconvenient questions that are like pillars in a wheel, will always be defeated if you apply the label of 'conspiracy theory' to them.

Conclusion

A review of the genesis of conspiracy theories and the reasons for believing in them, as well as a discussion of the material in the most frequently published articles on the subject, suggests that a general negative opinion is being formed towards the phenomenon. The aim of this text is to take a more positive view and to explore the idea that conspiracy theories encourage a limitless search for information, a quest for the truth or even the desire to know. This can be illustrated by the recent theory of planes flying over arable fields, dropping harmful substances. Since such a plane was spotted in winter, samples of the snow covering the field were sent to an independent laboratory in the Czech Republic. The samples were found to contain levels of harmful metals and other substances above the standard. This study has stimulated interest in the impact of natural phenomena on farmland and groundwater. Similarly, the introduction of covid vaccines has stimulated skeptical people to take an interest in the new mRNA technology, the composition of vaccines, the testing of materials, the lucrative bilateral agreements for the purchase of these medicines and has led to a refresher course on the general testing procedures for vaccines, clinical groups and the modes of transmission of viral diseases.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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