

Conspiracy and Democracy: Same as Always? We Don't Think So.

American Conspiracy Theories by Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent. New York, Oxford University Press, 2014.

The authors thank Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent for engaging with us in this exchange.

Uscinski and Parent have a sanguine view of the relationship between American democracy and conspiracy. Conspiratorial thinking does not pose any distinctive challenge to democratic politics, at least they point to none. They acknowledge that in extreme cases conspiracy theories can be reckless, lethal, or violent – their examples include blocking the use of HIV drugs and the 1992 shoot-out at Ruby Ridge, Idaho. And in passing they note that conspiracy can pose “systemic risks to the public and actions that menace the bedrock ground rules that minimize force and fraud” (Uscinski and Parent, 31). But this is not any part of their discussion, which emphasizes that conspiracy theory has always been part of democratic politics and it always will be. While the amount of conspiracy theory fluctuates, the overall picture is one of stability. The only change is who finds conspiracy theorizing attractive. It's those who are out of power. Democrats become conspiracy theorists when Republicans are in power and Republicans are conspiracy theorists when Democrats are in power. And in democracy, where parties alternate in power, everyone gets a turn. To sum up, here is the ethos of their work: conspiracism is common, not more prevalent now than in the past, and it is a regular feature of political life. It is normal, and not a malignant normality, either.

American Conspiracy Theories, published in 2014, would not have predicted and more importantly leaves us unable to understand what is happening in American democracy today: a president, very much in power, who sees conspiracy everywhere and who has the capacity to impose his compromised view of reality on the nation. The election that put him in office was “rigged!” The government he runs is filled with treacherous elements—a ‘deep state’ conspiring against him. Reporters at *The New York Times* spread “fake news” to make him look bad. Conspiratorial thinking, Uscinski and Parent tell us, is for “losers”—it is a weapon of the weak. Writing about a 2012 Obama reelection ad that blamed “secretive oil billionaires” for misrepresenting his record, Uscinski and Parent write, “It’s hard to view the most powerful person in the world as a defenseless victim of spectral forces, and for that reason the ad did not catch on” (Uscinski and Parent, 135). Today the most powerful person in the world constantly invokes conspiracy, and his political party submits to his claims. Conspiracy charges catch on with a vengeance.

Prisoners of their own empirical method, Uscinski and Parent can only see what they ask of their data, and what they ask is “who becomes a conspiracy theorist?” and “how much conspiracy theory is there?” These are significant questions, and their answers challenge certain common assumptions. Finding in their data that “how much” does not vary, they conclude that there is nothing special happening today. Finding in their data that a “conspiracy ideology” is independent of the left-right dimension of political attitudes, they direct attention away from the political activation of conspiratorial thinking and its consequences. Finding that those who are strongly disposed to conspiratorial thinking participate in politics less than

others implies that conspiratorial thinking is without potent political consequence.

We don't question the soundness of these empirical findings of 2014. We accept them, in so far as they go. But they give us very little with which to understand the relation of democracy and conspiracy either historically or today. From the vantage of 2020, these findings appear strangely benign.

In *A Lot of People Are Saying: the New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, we use a different method—an interpretive method informed by normative democratic theory. And using that method, we interpret the conspiratorial allegations that envelop and dramatically shape democratic politics today. We identify what the effects of conspiracism are for American democracy. We see today's conspiracism as a tool that the ambitious can use to get power and to cement and amplify their power. Contrary to Uscinski and Parent's view that *the amount* of conspiratorial thinking in American politics is always the same and that alarmism is unwarranted, we attend to the *form and substance of conspiracy claims* and argue that conspiratorial thinking presents two distinct challenges to democracy. It disorients citizens and delegitimizes democracy. Alarmism is warranted.

More on that in a moment. First, we would like to underline some of the important things we learn from Uscinski and Parent's research. Because although we find it inadequate to understand conspiracy and democracy, it is nonetheless an illuminating empirical study of who the true believers are, how they differ from others, and what activates their conspiratorial thinking. They posit a general dynamic of the relationship between individual

psychology, social groups, and political circumstances. First come individuals with a conspiratorial mindset. When these individuals belong to social groups that perceive themselves to be losing out, under attack, or deprived of power in society, their conspiratorial tendencies are activated. The meeting of conspiratorial predisposition, group identity, political circumstance, and partisan loyalty make certain conspiracy theories resonate with certain people (Uscinski and Parent, 156). This is a convincing general account of how conspiratorial thinking finds an audience.

American Conspiracy Theories offers epistemological standards to help differentiate well-founded and unfounded conspiracy theories—as they grant, some conspiracy theories are true. Uscinski and Parent classify, for instance, the Declaration of Independence itself as the seminal American conspiracy theory (a classification with which we agree). Their survey research shows that conspiracy theorists are just as likely to be Democrats as Republicans, women as men, and more likely to be poor, to participate very little in politics, to lack a college education. They show that we can distinguish between those who entertain a conspiracy theory now and then (almost everyone) from those who have a conspiratorial mindset.

The evidentiary bedrock for some of Uscinski and Parent’s core findings consists of the vast dataset they compiled of letters to the editor from *The New York Times* (and to a lesser extent, from the *Chicago Tribune*). From a sample of over 100,000 letters, they count the number of letters about conspiracy theories in order to create a yearly index of “conspiracy talk” that spans a 121 year period from 1890 to 2010 (Uscinski and Parent, 57). Uscinski and Parent use the index to test a number of hypotheses about

what drives conspiracy talk, including economic conditions (no effect), growth of governmental size and power (no effect) social change (no effect), technological change (no effect), influence of films and TV shows about conspiracies (no effect), polarization (no effect) and salience of foreign threats (no effect). There is some suggestion in their data that the prominence of elite talk about conspiracy may have some effect (Uscinski and Parent, 110-128).

But the core findings have to do with the aggregate amount of conspiracy talk. The total amount of conspiracy talk in American politics, they write, “does not fluctuate much” (Uscinski and Parent, 111). As they elaborate, “our depiction of conspiracy theorizing is hydraulic; conspiracy theories are a liquid that, when displaced, soon find its level again” (Uscinski and Parent, 109). They conclude that “alarms sounded for the rising tide of conspiracy theory” are mistaken since the prevalence of U.S. conspiracy theorizing has not varied much (Uscinski and Parent, 157). Uscinski and Parent find temporal high-points -- the 1890’s theories of covert corporate monopolies and the 1950s Red Scare. And the particulars change depending on which social groups are rising and falling, and on which party is in power. But “[t]he most marked trend in the data,” they report, “is stability” (Uscinski and Parent, 129).

Uscinski and Parent also find that people have predispositions to see the world in conspiratorial terms—predispositions ingrained in childhood or via some other unelaborated process of socialization. On their account, some people learn to see conspiracy everywhere; they are on the cynical end of the conspiracy dimension. And some people discount it entirely; they are on the naïve end of the dimension. And it is illuminating to learn that one’s

placement on the dimension of conspiracy thinking has some correspondence to age, race, income, and education, but does not correspond to ideology or partisanship (Uscinski and Parent, 82-103).

What is missing from this account is the distinction between the population of people who adopt conspiracy theory – conspiracy consumers -- and those who invent and propagate conspiracy charges in politics. Conspiracy ‘entrepreneurs’ may register high on the conspiratorial dimension, but they also deploy conspiratorial thinking strategically, to advance a political agenda and to amplify their own power. And beyond the true believer-consumers and the entrepreneurs are those who acquiesce, who fail to challenge unfounded conspiratorial claims or who coyly suggest that there ‘might be something to them,’ without actually endorsing them. Consider Kris Kobach who in his official capacity as Secretary of State of Kansas in 2012—at the end of President Obama’s first term and more than a year after the White House publicized Obama’s long form birth certificate—ruled that he lacked sufficient evidence to decide whether Obama’s name should be removed from the November 2012 presidential election ballot. “I do think,” he stated, “that the factual record could be supplemented” (Carpenter 2012). Conspiratorial thinking is a tool that is deployed to advance a political agenda. It can be used cynically by those who know that much conspiratorial talk is fabrication. Ignoring the political dynamics will obscure the relation between conspiracy and power in democratic politics today.

Perhaps Uscinski and Parent say so little about the way conspiratorial thinking is deployed politically because they are so focused on their finding

that conspiratorial thinking “is separate from right-wing or left-wing attitudes and is spread evenly across political ideology and partisanship”(Uscinski and Parent, 14). Their data dispute the view that the political right is more prone to conspiracy theorizing than the left (p. 93). They take particular aim at Richard Hofstadter’s association with what Uscinski and Parent call “slightly pathological right-wing extremists” (Uscinski and Parent, 154) and they ascribe this error to liberals or “partisan blindness” (Uscinski and Parent, 104). Conspiracy theorists are as likely to be moderates as they are to be “extreme or freakish,” they write (Uscinski and Parent, 157). Again, for them, a conspiracy theory is a conspiracy theory. They offer no distinction between the people, the political context, the nature of partisanship, or even the content of conspiracy thinking to help us separate the dangerous from the innocuous.

Nothing in the conclusions that Uscinski and Parent draw from their empirical studies suggests that the effects of conspiracism on political life are destructive of the sort of thinking required of democratic citizens or of foundational democratic institutions. Here is their conclusion about the relation between conspiracy and democracy: “Democracy demands that power change hands, and this means that sooner or later nearly everyone will play the winner . . . and then the loser. In this respect, conspiracy theories are fair . . . Eventually, everyone savors the sweet righteousness of the prosecution before drinking the bitter draft of the persecuted.”

Their findings push in the direction of normalization and homogenization. The authors do not indicate when conspiratorial thinking is a force for or a product of democratic disruption. They have nothing to say about the

institutional consequences of conspiracism when it is leveled by elected officials. Nothing in their work would have prepared readers for a conspiracist moving into the White House, for the form conspiracy thinking takes today, or for its consequences. What Uscinski and Parent do not do, indeed cannot do, is offer conceptual tools that would help us make sense of what is happening in democratic politics as we write.

American Conspiracy Theories adds to our understanding of the conspiratorial mindset, but it does not help us understand the threat that a conspiracist view of reality poses when it is housed in centers of power and when a president attempts to both own reality and impose a compromised sense of reality on the nation. That is what we as political theorists do: use normative concepts to assess the changing form and substance of conspiratorial thinking and its assault on democratic political life. That is the purpose of our book.

And what we see is not conspiracy theory, but what we call conspiracism – or *conspiracy without the theory*. Like Uscinski and Parent we describe the Declaration of Independence as the original American conspiracy theory, but we emphasize that the signers aggregated evidence and argument to convince colonists of what was not self-evident – the British plot to enslave America. We point to the list of grievances that added up to a pattern – a “long train of abuses all tending the same way.” Our point in appealing to the Declaration is to differentiate this classic conspiracy theory, which reasons from evidence and marshal’s argument to show that things are not as they seem and to point to malignant intent, from the conspiracism distorting political life today.

What we call *conspiracism* dispenses with evidence and argument. It consists of bare assertion – often only a word or two will do the job: climate change is a *hoax*! The deep state, a cabal of civil servants entrenched in the federal bureaucracy, is conspiring to effect a *coup*! Ukraine *not Russia* hacked Clinton’s emails! The chief question for us as political theorists, and the contrast with Uscinski and Parent, is what are the consequences for democracy? Our conceptual distinction between classic conspiracy theory and conspiracism or conspiracy without the theory is an effort to name the unnamed and thus to help us make sense of what is happening in public life before our eyes: the degradation of democracy from conspiracism launched from centers of power.

We argue that there are two distinctive effects on democracy that flow from conspiracism. One is *disorientation*. Trump’s claim that he won the popular vote in 2016 – and was the victim of massive voter fraud involving 3 million -- assaults our sense of reality. It insults our common sense. Proceeding as it does by bare assertion without evidence or argument, conspiracist claims raise the question, “what does it mean to know something?” When the president claims that National Park Service’s photographs of his inauguration showing the crowd to be modest and not ‘the largest ever’ were doctored, we are disoriented. The result of claims without evidence and argument is a polarization that runs deeper than partisan polarization. “Epistemic polarization” is an unbridgeable divide not just about what is true but about what it means to know that the photographs were doctored. Partisan polarization fragments the country. Epistemic polarization makes it

impossible to understand, discuss, deliberate, negotiate, bargain, and even to disagree. It threatens to make democratic politics itself impossible.

The second consequence of conspiracy without the theory is *delegitimation* of foundational democratic institutions. “Fake news” delegitimizes the press. We’ve seen the accusation of a deep state delegitimize one government agency after another, in particular, knowledge-producing institutions from the Central Intelligence Agency to the Environmental Protection Agency—and now the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Delegitimation is not just a claim of partisan bias. Nor is it just mistrust. It denies the meaning, value, and authority of these institutions. They do not merit consent or compliance.

In our view, the delegitimation of political opposition is key to conspiracism’s assault on democracy. This challenges the usefulness of Uscinski and Parent’s generalization that conspiracy theories leveled by rival parties stand in a tit-for-tat equilibrium and are hydraulically self-leveling. Legitimate opposition is the linchpin of representative democracy. When opposition is cast as not just wrong but conspiratorial, even treasonous, the justification is in hand for eliminating the opposition party by any means.

As political theorists, we are concerned with the normative effects of conspiracy thinking on democracy. Empirical political science often has other foci. True to their discipline, Uscinski and Parent are planted on the terrain of empirical investigation of who conspiracy believers are and how the conspiratorial mindset is activated. They have marshaled innovative

empirical techniques to answer these questions and use their findings to counter a number of common assumptions. But the empirical method has fatal limitations when it is not coupled with an interpretative method that does two things. First, it looks at what the parameters of what counts as a ‘theory’ and thus allows us to distinguish between conspiracy theory and conspiracist claims without a theory. Second, it attends to what is distinctive about conspiracist claims: their capacity to produce disorientation and deligitimation. As interpretive political theorists, we have relied extensively on the empirical findings of political scientists, psychologists, and others. Without reciprocal attention, even the most illuminating political science can become captive to its own empirical method and cannot explain what it fails to identify. The political science of conspiratorial thinking needs robust political theory to guide its questions and to bring the politics back in.

Citations:

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