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A Psychology of Conspiracy Theory (Edited)

Real fangs, fake jungle
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Conspiracy theories used to be kooky inventions homemade in somebody's mental garage. Now they're tools in mainstream contests for power.

Instead of the March of Science, we see scientists marching to protest the use of conspiracy theory to defund science. The White House argues that climate change is a hoax by the world's scientists. Pollution is a bureaucratic trick at the Environmental Protection Agency. We know science works because we use the Internet, antibiotics, and other outcomes all the time. A conspiracy theory won't cure your strep infection.

Conspiracy theories are labor-saving devices and home remedies for anxiety and depression. US culture makes JFK hero of Camelot and suddenly he's absurdly murdered. Conspiracy theory musters an answer. It's free. It's easy. It's difficult to prove or disprove. It shrinks the unreasonable world down so you "can get your mind around it."

Conspiracy theories are nothing new. Nero torched Rome. The neighbors are witches. The Elders of Zion plan to exterminate or at least enslave us. The theories are powerful because they promise to manage fear of death. Instead of feeling poisonous worry, you name the threat and feel heroic for uncovering the secret truth.

Since the theories are false, anxiety comes back as obsession with the theory and efforts to convert others to believe. Preachers or cult gurus play out the same dynamics when they advertise the secret of eternal life to convert followers or explain a catastrophe as "God's wrath" or the wages of sin. The larger the group of believers, the truer and more natural it seems.

The theories' Eureka excites the nervous system. The believer may feel reality split into a fake conventional world and the "true" reality of the theory world. Preachers have long argued that earthly life is a pale illusion compared to the heavenly world beyond. The devout and at least some terrorists count on this promise.

Today conspiracy fantasies are a hot topic. Partisan broadcasters and shock jocks popularize the theories, but conspiracy also does a brisk business in politics and in social media. The effect on public reality is hard to judge. As the theories become more openly manipulative, audiences become defensive.

What emerges is a mind-boggling quality best understood as play. Not just play as entertainment, but play as a sense of tacitness or as-if-ness. A movie is unreal, but you may "get into" it. Fans can forget that football is only a game. In this sense conspiracy theories can be true and untrue. Obama is a closet Muslim who hates you. Trump is a racist and white supremacist. Hillary Clinton is part of the Shadow Government. Rampage killings are government hoaxes to confiscate your guns.

If you fear or despise Obama, Hillary, Trump, rampage killers, or “big government,” these claims can seem absurd yet also true to you. If you wish to believe them, your gut and your brain can both be right in different ways. Meaning itself is often tacit. When critics objected that a recent campaigner kept obviously lying, his supporters chided, “Don’t take him literally.”

In evolutionary terms, young animals play in order to explore and learn. Humans play because we retain juvenile traits more than most other animals. We try out choices and possibilities with as-if thinking. Why should we bother with conspiracy theories?

American life is stressful, especially for the poor, who actually live shorter lives than the well-groomed rich. The economic system rewards the top dogs and starves those at the bottom. Politics takes your money and invests it in wars and Wall Street, not in your health care. These are death-anxiety themes. We cope in part by bingeing on TV, whose programs specialize in escape from death. Cops and docs rescue victims. The camera loves a winning contestant. Reality TV shows you enraged social death safely locked up in a "maximum security" prison. On TV, nature is all fangs and venom: kill or be killed. But it's just a show. Ads hammer you with jolly insurance fantasies and now cancer drugs. In effect, TV is fine-tuned to play your emergency nervous system.

Play makes this adrenaline addiction tolerable, even thrilling. We exercise our paranoia knowing it’s only tacitly real. We make fun of manipulative ads, and the ads dissolve these defenses by making fun of themselves. In this cycle, play becomes too complex to be reasoned out. We have to rely on intuition and gut instinct—which is obvious in the partisan reflexes in the news these days.

Electronic communication has opened up a new play space. Social media invites everyone to have an opinion, and amplifies it. Onscreen, “opinion” can look as authoritative as fact-checked print news and circulate faster. Tweets, Instagrams, and even Facebook posts are headlines or punchlines rather than an exposition. Cognitively, social media favors strong gut signals, as we saw in the widespread use of Facebook to disseminate (“share”) fake election news.

When conspiracy theories go mainstream, they’re more likely to be manipulative or weaponized. Rant radio’s Alex Jones regularly uses conspiracy themes as excuses to rage on the air, which apparently thrills his audience. Jones’s propaganda demonizes government. Psychologically, it celebrates the fantasy of self-creation. Were he not oppressed by government, elites, and losers, the hero could accomplish wonders by himself. This premise reveals the childhood roots of conspiracy theory and the ideology it supports.

Jones conforms to a familiar type in partisan broadcasting: the angry child tyrannized by an abusive parent-figure: “big government,” “the elite”, a global cabal. The malicious parent-figure is forever bossing the child and giving “his” things to other kids who are undeserving losers. The adults exclude the kids from their talk: they conspire.

As children, we start out helpless and grow up trying to spy out the secrets of the adult world. Kids know that secrets make you powerful if you withhold them—but also if you share them with favored pals. Secrets form a club or a gang.

It’s understandable if unwise that people let themselves be infantilized. After all, the globalized world is bigger than ever, dangerously volatile, and remote-controlled. Who doesn’t feel dwarfed by the scale of things?

And there's another difficulty. I think we underestimate how prevalent forms of conspiracy theory are in American culture. Corporate secrecy gives critics a rash. Advertising invites you to "discover the secret" of youthful skin or a germ-free bathroom. Ads falsify information, bullying, making "smart buyers" superior to losers. Think how much of American political life is not informative but advertising.

In the meantime, you can see why the culture of fakery is so hostile to science. And no wonder scientists have been roused to protest. And a good thing too. Ideally science is public and transparent. Results are shared and replicated—or not. By contrast, conspiracy thinking favors insinuation and focusses on motives. Like American TV and a good deal of American politics, conspiracy theories offers excitement. What's missing is information.

Scientists know that hypotheses—"opinions"—are a dime a dozen. It's the laboratory grind that proves which ones are worth saving. The civil version of the lab is the courtroom. A Florida court has jailed a woman for threatening the life of Leonard Pozner, whose child was murdered at Sandy Hook. The verdict shocked the woman out of the hysterical atmosphere of online conspiracy groups. "I don't know where my heart and head were that day," she told the court and Mr Pozner, "but they were not in the right place. It was the worst mistake of my life and I am truly sorry." Her apology honors reality-testing that can be soul-shaking but also the basis of wisdom, especially when we can see reality-testing as a process, not as a glittering trophy.

Resources used in this essay:

1. "The New World Order," dir. Luke Meyer and Andrew Neel. "Conspiracy theorist radio host Alex Jones has claimed the government perpetrated the 9/11 attacks and the tragedies at Columbine, Oklahoma City, Sandy Hook, and the Boston Marathon, among others. He also alleges that a shadowy cabal of global elites are planning to kill or enslave most of the world's population; argues the government is using airplanes to spray 'chemtrails' to enact population control; and claims the government is putting chemicals into everyday products to turn children gay."https://www.mediamatters.org/blog/2016/12/01/comprehensive-guide-alex-jo...

2. For further exploration of conspiracy theories, see my interview with Joe Virgillito on BTR, April 10, 2017: http://www.btrtoday.com/listen/thedailybeat/week-of-041017-8/

Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (Free Press)

Kirby Farrell, "Conspiracy Theories and You" (May 28, 2016) https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/swim-in-denial/201605/conspiracy-th...

Kirby Farrell, *The Psychology of Abandon* (Leveller's Press)

Andrew Higgins, et al, "Inside a Fake News Sausage Factory," *New York Times,* Nov. 25, 2016 https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/25/world/europe/fake-news-donald-trump-h...