

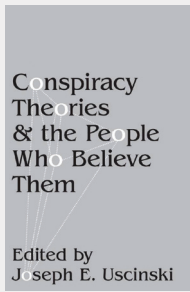
# Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe In Them

*Edited by Joseph E. Uscinski*

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Joseph Uscinski's multi-author volume attempts to bring together a wide range of disciplinary perspectives on the phenomena of conspiracy theories (CTs) into one book. Given the significant epistemological disagreements between the disciplines that exist in the field of conspiracy theory research, it is fair to say that Uscinski has done a good job in producing a volume that balances the opposing perspectives. The book is comprised of the views of 40 academics from across a host of different disciplines. The volume partly stems from a 2015 conference on CTs that was organized and hosted by Uscinski; at that conference, there was a clear disagreement between the philosophers and the psychologists/social psychologists on the importance of studying conspiracies as ideas or as mental formations. The philosophers accused the psychologists of pathologizing people who espouse CTs rather than assessing their truth claims and the reasoning of the ideas presented. The psychologists in turn accused the philosophers of merely asking more questions and not pursuing research programs.<sup>1</sup> The book reflects and features this balkanized difference of approach.



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The book is intended for a wide audience and generally, the various chapters remain fairly accessible and free of excessive academic jargon. Uscinski's volume, while balanced in its coverage of differing perspectives and approaches, is, unfortunately, lacking in some key areas. First, it includes no studies

focusing on the particular rhetorical features of CTs and how they are able to be so persuasive in a variety of contexts. Second, there is a lack of engagement with the new media environment and how it has generated controversy with respect to the extent of its impact on CT propagation and the modes and methods employed within that medium.<sup>2</sup> These shortcomings, along with Uscinski's superficial and pathologizing attitude toward CTs and conspiracy rhetors will be discussed below.

In the first chapter, Uscinski aims to give some background to the topic and to introduce the general content and scope of the volume. The bulk of the chapter focuses on the conspiratorial rhetoric employed by both Republicans and Democrats in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Yet Uscinski provides

nothing more than a superficial rhetorical analysis of the various political speeches, nor is there an explanation as to why that election became so mired by conspiratorial allegations. Importantly, the fact that (often rather unreasonable) conspiracy theorizing is carried out by U.S. politicians, as well as many leaders abroad, is a challenge to the view that it is only propagated by a paranoid-minded niche of the populace. Uscinski (among other contributors to the book) argues that, at least in the U.S. context, conspiracy theorizing is carried out by political ‘losers’ who wish to impact the topical agenda and create new contentions in order to gain influence. Yet he stretches his definition of “conspiracy theorizing” to such an extent that it becomes overly dismissive of ideological arguments that have some merit. An example of this is how Uscinski refers to Bernie Sanders’ concept of the “one percent” wealthy elite as a conspiracy theory about the dominant power of a “small group of wealthy individuals.” Sanders accuses this group of both “gambling” in the market and “rigging” the economy. We are told that since these activities contradict each other, they are tantamount to a propagandistic conspiracy discourse, according to Uscinski. Disturbingly, rather than actually conducting an honest analysis of the historical and ideological context of this discourse, Uscinski goes on to accuse Sanders of using a rhetorical style that is directly similar to that of the Nazis, stating that “their propaganda attacked Jews for being greedy capitalists, but also for being subversive communists (p. 4).” If Uscinski had bothered to look into the malaise of deep economic corruption in the U.S. and had actually read the literature being published by academics in fields such as business law, he would come to know that ‘rigging’ the economy and ‘gambling’ in certain markets have been facilitated by both the government and powerful finan-

cial interests.<sup>3</sup> Outside the context of the U.S. election, Uscinski continues to paint a generalist picture of conspiracy theorizing as epistemologically suspect. Skepticism about genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and John F. Kennedy (JFK) assassination theories are labeled dismissively as being impediments to ‘critical progress.’ While mentioning the attempt by Gülen to overthrow the Turkish government, Uscinski fails to actually mention the factual reality of the FETÖ ((Fetullahçı Terör Örgütü, Fetullahist Terror Organization) conspiracy and focuses his ire on the AK Party regime instead. In this chapter, we are also told that people who conspiracy theorize make less money and are more prone to political violence.

Subsequent chapters that are not authored by the editor are, more balanced and useful. Michael Butter and Peter Knight in Chapter 2 explore the history of conspiracy theory research, the emergence of Hofstadter’s ‘paradigmatic style’ paradigm in the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and how the ‘various disciplines’ operate with vastly different conceptualizations of conspiracy theory” (p. 42). Much interdisciplinary work clearly needs to be done. Chapter 4, authored by Andrew Mckenzie-McHarg, embarks on a historical analysis of how the term ‘conspiracy theory’ became popularized by the media. The answer to this question, apparently, is the phenomenon of “scientization” and the adoption of scientific vocabulary by areas outside of the traditional domain of science. Thus newspapers, while hardly scientific publications, started more and more to use terms like ‘evidence,’ ‘refutation,’ ‘fact,’ and ‘theory.’ To accuse a powerful group of conspiring thus turned from being a mere suspicion of conspiracy to being a ‘theory.’ Scientists may contest such a term, given the general lack of scientific method or systematic rigor attached to many plausible

conspiracy narratives. Chapters 9 and 10, authored by an oceanographer and a cognitive scientist respectively, discuss contexts where members of the public use CTs to attack mainstream scientific accounts of events. The problem of disinformation on the Internet is highlighted, as is the relative lack of scientific literacy among many Americans. These chapters, however, while revealing some of the irrational paranoia of certain individuals, do little to explain why there is a crisis of trust with respect to scientific institutions among certain groups. More problematically, the authors speak about the “rejection of science” as if “science” were a monistic institution that cannot be questioned, and that consensus within it cannot be attacked or questioned. In reality, scientific practice is neither value-free nor free from institutional motivations. Chapter 15 is part of the section of the book that discusses whether CTs are “anti-science.” Strangely, however, the author (Ted Goertzel) produces a generalist picture of CTs as “conspiracy memes” that consist of rhetorical devices that ignore the arguments of those who defend authorities accused of conspiracy and that “distort and bias discussion” (p. 226). Without elaborating on this rhetorical labeling, Goertzel goes on to claim that even Noam Chomsky is a ‘conspiracy theorist’ because his propaganda model alleges “consistent behavior on the part of American and Israeli elites” (p. 233). that is impossible to explain without resorting to CTs.

Matthew Dentith’s argument in Chapter 6 deals with the philosophy of CTs and how social science literature fails to address CTs’ unique characteristics and implications. For example, CTs have been produced that utilize “plausible arguments and evidence” (p. 96) but were dismissed for political or ideological reasons. They later turned out to be true.

Dentith also states that “the fact that some theory has official status tells us nothing about its epistemic merits” (p. 101). Kathryn Olmsted’s historical discussion in Chapter 19 explores why conspiracy theories have been so popular throughout American history. She concludes that their popularity stems from as well as the historical roots of the American Revolution. She argues also that the suspicion of power is part of the ideological belief of American citizens (regardless of political affiliation) and given the existence of very real government crimes since at least the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even more, heightened suspicion would be entirely reasonable.

To conclude, this volume will be of interest to a broad range of readers who are interested in the phenomenon of conspiracy theories as well as how experts are responding to them. Crucially, the volume allows readers to become aware of how truly contentious the term ‘conspiracy theorist’ actually is. For example, should the term ‘conspiracist’ be used or ‘conspiracy theorist’ when referring to theories that challenge official narratives? Should we use a special term just for those who turn conspiracy theorizing into a vocation? Readers will come to engage with these kinds of issues as a result of a full exploration of the volume. It will also introduce them to the dilemma that conspiracy theory rhetoric poses for democracy and the democratic process as a whole. In summary, the quality of the chapters of the volume is variable in terms of scholarly insight, though there are some useful insights and explorations of the evolution and adoption of conspiracy discourse. Yet, as mentioned above, there is a lack of engagement or dialogue between the disciplines, as well as a lack of discussion of the very controversial issue of social media and its impact on conspiracy theory discourse around

the world. In the era of COVID-19 and what many have termed an online ‘infodemic,’ it seems that an interdisciplinary engagement with CTs is needed more than ever.<sup>4</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Jesse Walker, “What I Saw at the Conspiracy Theory Conference,” *Reason*, (March 18, 2015), retrieved September 20, 2020, from <https://reason.com/2015/03/18/what-i-saw-at-the-conspiracy-theory-conf/>.

2. Peter Pomerantsev, “To Unreality—and Beyond,” *Journal of Design and Science*, Vol. 6, (October 23, 2019), retrieved from <https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/ic90uta1/release/4>.

3. Steven A. Ramirez, *Lawless Capitalism: The Subprime Crisis and the Case for an Economic Rule of Law*, (New York; London: NYU Press, 2013), p. 213.

4. Daniel Allington, Bobby Duffy, Simon Wessely, Nayana Dhavan, and James Rubin, “Health-Protective Behaviour, Social Media Usage and Conspiracy Belief During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency,” *Psychological Medicine* 1-7, (June 9, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7298098/>.