Belief in conspiracy theories: wonderfully surrounded by dark forces

So-called conspiracy theories have been circulating about Coronavirus. Some people believe in them. And the phenomenon is best analyzed by treating it as a belief. An essay by Anselm Neft.

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In mid-April, a good acquaintance involved me in a conversation on the street about the Corona crisis. He had never felt as bewildered as he did now. I nodded, I could understand that. But then he said: "I just don't understand why they'd put up with the economic crisis." I asked him whom he meant by "they", but he just smiled mysteriously.

When he said goodbye, he suggested that I ask myself what Bill Gates and Jens Spahn, the German health minister, had discussed at "the Bilderbergers". At home I looked online: According to Wikipedia, Bill Gates had been to a Bilderberg conference in 2010, Jens Spahn in 2017. Maybe I had misunderstood something.

The next day, on the street, a middle-class woman pushing a stroller gave me a lecture on the plans of the vaccination mafia. When I recounted this incident to a friend on the phone, he suddenly became very excited: he would rather die than be vaccinated. Since then, I have been seeing daily posts on Facebook, some of them very long, about the "scandalous hoax" of the Corona panic from friends and acquaintances.

Many people experience such encounters. Some are annoyed, condescending, or worried about those "tin foil hat wearers". More than ever, the country seems to be split between the reasonable and the crazy.

But is it that simple? Are the common assumptions about so-called conspiracy theorists correct? Or do the supposed voices of reason often make it too easy for themselves?

By name, conspiracy theories are simply theories about conspiracies. Corresponding assumptions don't need to be wrong. There are indeed secret machinations of groups that are directed against the common good. Drug cartels, for example, would not be able to do business if it weren't for the people deep enough into supposedly respectable societies who promote, support, and cover their criminal activities; dirty money, for example, does not end up in the regular money cycle by itself.

Watergate, the largest political scandal in US history to date, concealed clandestine activities by high-ranking White House employees and the re-election campaign at the time of President Richard Nixon – it was essentially a conspiracy at heart.

In another instance, the flu drug Tamiflu could only be sold on such a large scale by the pharmaceutical company Roche to several countries because test results were manipulated, studies were withheld, and the scientists who were used as mouthpieces were not impartial or independent researchers. An editor of DIE ZEIT speaks of a conspiracy in 2012. As early as 2009, Arte, the European culture TV channel, released a documentary on the same subject called "Profiteers of Fear". After all, not every criticism of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) can be dismissed as pure fiction. In an article from 2017, for example, the Heinrich Böll Foundation assumed that the BMGF had paid a PR company to undermine the only UN process for regulating gene drive technologies – the uncontrolled release of genetically manipulated organisms.

Not everyone who is currently critical of the Gates Foundation or pharmaceutical companies is a lunatic. On the contrary, those who exclude conspiracies here and elsewhere from the start are extremely naive and poorly informed. A suspicious questioning of authorities, experts, and government plans always makes sense. If criticism were no longer expressed, it would be bad for democracy. And the greater the number of conspirators involved, the more quickly the conspiracy comes to light. At least that's what science journalist, physicist, and cancer researcher David Robert Grimes calculated. According to Grimes, a conspiracy that involves at least 2,500 participants would not take even five years for someone to leak it to the general public. A conspiracy of all the thousands of scientists who point out man-made climate change would therefore be extremely unlikely.

Beliefs, not theories

When I speak of "conspiracy theorists", I should first clarify the answers to these questions: is there someone pointing to reports of actual conspiracies and non-transparent intrigues? Is someone speculating about possible conspiracies? Or does someone preach about the work of dark forces?

When questioning no longer questions itself and assumptions about dark plots are set as truths, speculation turns into belief. The term “conspiracy belief” is still less established in many languages than “conspiracy theorist” but the former more accurately describes the attitude of people who hold such views, which are discussed as a problem. These people usually do not propose refutable theories, but cultivate beliefs. Unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses in the past, they often don't even ring the doorbell beforehand and ask if they can talk to you about the secret string pullers. They spread their faith in abundance via social media, on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, in messenger apps like WhatsApp and Telegram.

In my study of Comparative Religious Studies, participatory observation played an important role in exploring various belief systems in as unbiased a way as possible. We spoke to Mormons and anthroposophists, visited evangelicals and Scientologists. My professor taught me to see the believers not as objects alone and to see myself not solely as a subject. Such a separation is often seen as particularly scientific, but according to my professor, it would only increase the subjectivity of my observation. I shouldn't pretend that I don't have a personally colored view of the world myself, fuelled by convictions, prejudices, fears, desires, and beliefs. I should make myself aware of these before each observation and description. Ultimately, this professor demanded nothing less from the researchers than engaging in self-reflection again and again.

Secret societies and their power in the 20th century

Applying this method to my view of conspiracy believers around me helps me step aside.

First of all, it occurs to me that even I cultivated conspiracy beliefs to a certain extent during an earlier phase of my life. As a child I was brought up as a Christian, was an altar boy for years, prayed, and often spoke to God. When I was young, my parents' Christianity seemed questionable to me, and the Jesuits at high school seemed increasingly hypocritical and repulsive. In search of a spiritual, resistant, self-empowering substitute without the supernatural guilt complex that I now associated with Christianity, I turned to occultist teachings and esoteric brooding as a teenager. My confidence in the beliefs of those around me was deeply shaken, especially by the obvious contradictions between sermon and practice.

When I was in my early 20s, I discovered the two-volume "Secret Societies and Their Power in the 20th Century" in an alternative bookstore in the southern part of Bonn. The work was published in 1994 by Jan Udo Holey under the pseudonym Jan van Helsing, a man whom the secret service described as a right-wing extremist mystic. In 1996 the two "Secret Societies" volumes were blacklisted for incitement and taken off the market. In this book the Jewish world conspiracy is presented in a jumble of horror fantasy, "Mein Kampf", occult secret knowledge, ufology, and a mixture of facts and fantasies, and it fit well into the right-esoteric thinking that I cultivated at that time.

A fellow student furiously described the book as dangerous nonsense, which only further convinced me that I was on the right track. I was simply too illiterate, brazen, ignorant, and emotionally closed to let the scope of the Holocaust approach me or even to recognize that Holey was quoting Holocaust deniers and practicing Nazi glorification. I loved the two volumes! Instead of having to laboriously deal with politics, sociology, and history, I had a spectacular master key here: a small elite has been using its power for millennia to shape the world in its sense. History was not a chaotic

coincidence, but the result of a huge conspiracy made up of numerous small conspiracies. To understand who was conspiring, all I had to do was see who held the power in their hands these days. Follow the money. This explanation greatly accommodated my laziness, my hostility to authority, my strong distrust, and my vanity. I saw through what many others did not see through. For me, the belief in a Jewish world conspiracy was never deeply rooted, I just speculated about it and felt no urge to proselytize. It was enough for me to talk shop with selected people murmuring about the ancient conspiracy. At some point the interest was lost without me realizing it. In retrospect, I think that my analytical thinking developed further and that I found myself to be more effective than ever before during my studies. During this time—strongly favored by my literary ambitions—I let people come to me who could offer me something more exciting and vivacious in the long run than right-esoteric murmurs: serious engagement with politics and intellectual questions, persistent work that is tedious, but can lead to real satisfaction, solidarity, and compassion.

I just didn't need a conspiracy belief. But I have an inkling that such a belief can express not only a need for admiration and semi-educated know-it-all, but also a profound crisis of trust. What if the majority of people either lie or believe in lies? Can I trust the government? The media? The science? The "conventional medicine"? What my friends are saying? Isn't the truth always behind the scenes?

What angers me? What scares me?

After this memory of my own flirtation with conspiracy myths and right-wing extremism, I can look at my anger at my friend, missionary conspiracy believers, and unrestrained “hygiene demonstrators”, and notice my own feelings of powerlessness and fear behind it.

I feel powerless because his questions ("So there were hardly any 5G towers installed during the lockdown?") actually fall back on rumours that are easily spread and can only be refuted with great difficulty. In this exchange I am forced to be an extra in a play. Whatever I say becomes a prop for the self-staging of my counterpart, and especially through contradiction I underline his or her uniqueness. If I don't want to take part in this, all I am left with is breaking off the contact.

I feel fear because the consensus about fundamental questions between people seems so fragile. In addition, my friend's fundamental distrust brushes up against my own uncertainty: what if nothing is really as it seems? Can I trust the experts? Am I just a believer myself? At the end of the day, are all my so-called certainties also just beliefs? What do I really know? What can be known beyond any doubt?

I calm myself by saying: I don't need to know what's going on in Bill Gates's mind because unlike some conspiracy believers, I don't spread rumors about him. The prosecutor has the burden of proof. If their arguments are inaccurate or their alleged evidence is unproven or generally unprovable, there is no reason to believe them.

Nevertheless, there remains a residual uncertainty: even if logic, verifiability, and other scientific standards are the most reasonable, as they are the most rational tools for securing knowledge, there remains an abyss of the unknown. And the search for the foundation of logic, like our entire existence, ends in contradictions, as mathematicians like Bertrand Russell and Georg Cantor discovered in the formulation of paradoxes. People can react confidently to this residual uncertainty and still feel safe. But they can also be deeply disturbed and perceive the cosmos as scary. Anyone who feels too comfortable here as an proponent of the enlightenment should read Eugene Thacker's volumes on "Horror of Philosophy" or Thomas Ligotti's "The Conspiracy Against the Human Race".

You don't choose whether you have a basic trust or not. Massive abuse of trust in childhood, for example, can cause a fundamental feeling of powerlessness, which is later reactivated by new abuse or crisis conditions. Does a conspiracy belief offer relief to people who are very insecure because it can explain their own insecurity without requiring a psychological insight? As obvious as this question may be, there is no clear study on this.

The typical conspiracy believer does not exist

In fact, belief in conspiracy theories has not been explored as thoroughly as one would expect from a phenomenon that we think is so relevant today. In 2010, the social psychologists Viren Swami and Rebecca Coles referred in a research status overview to very different explanations for the belief in conspiracy theories. Some studies see the main motivation as dealing with helplessness and powerlessness, while others focus on a desire to highlight individuality, a narrative outlet for the expression of negative feelings, or a form of crisis management or strengthening self-esteem.

The typical conspiracy believer apparently does not exist and the influence of possible factors such as educational level, media literacy, or gender is not so clearly proven in order to derive causalities from it—unless you pick the study that best fits your perspective.

However, a series of studies by renowned researchers suggests that increased training in analytical thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories. According to a recent study by Western Sydney University, people with schizotypal personality disorder, primary psychopaths, and people with the personality trait of Machiavellianism believe in conspiracy theories significantly more often than others. In a nutshell, this includes people who can be very headstrong, emotionally rigid, maladjust-

ed, lacking in friendships, ideologically independent, or open to magical thinking. Also, conspiracy ideas can take on massive proportions during a psychotic episode or an acute schizophrenic phase. But that does not mean in reverse that conspiracy theorists are automatically schizophrenic or psychotic.

A maximum of three percent of the population is diagnosed with schizotypal personality disorder in the course of their lives. Significantly more people believe in conspiracy theories. For example, according to a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, 29 percent of the US population is convinced that Covid-19 was grown in the laboratory. And in the 2019 edition of the so-called Mitte-Studie, by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, which does regular surveys on right-wing extremism in Germany, almost 46 percent of those surveyed stated that there are secret organizations who have an influence on political decisions. So there seems to be a broad basis for conspiracy beliefs in Germany.

(However, such surveys have to be questioned, because lobbyists such as the NSA or the BND, the german intelligence agency, for example, can influence political decisions, even if they are not secret organizations. To be able to speak of clear conspiracy belief, one would have to know exactly how the respondents understand such a question.)

Can we be simply astounded by this disposition or should we actually find it worrisome? In any case, it is not a pure time phenomenon: in his book “Suspicious Minds”, published in 2015, psychologist and science journalist Rob Brotherton argues that the human brain generally tends toward distrust and accepting the assumptions typical of conspiracy beliefs. Brotherton sees it above all as an evolutionary advantage.

Why bad things happen to good people

In a contribution to the volume “Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy”, published in 1987, German historian Dieter Groh defined a conspiracy theory as an attempt to explain why bad things happen to good people. Such stories have something comforting for everyone. Because if the evil of the world is man-made, it can ultimately be prevented. At the same time, a conspiracy belief relieves you of your own responsibility: if super villains determine fate, I am not to blame for the state of the world, my surroundings, and ultimately my own life. Christianity can also be looked at in this way as it cultivated a belief in a mega conspirator centuries ago: ultimately, the devil is behind all evil. It represents the dark side of the “gracious powers", in which the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that one could be "wonderfully sheltered". But even evil can create security.

An interesting question would be to what extent has the enlightened call to use one's own mind, in combination with much more available information, promoted the rise of conspiracy beliefs for everyone. Is it the dark twin of the Enlightenment? A privatist substitute religion that points to increasing individualization, the growing appreciation of rationality, and the decline of a generally shared religious belief? If no god and no devil is responsible for the state of the world, then it now rests on the shoulders of people who may massively overestimate their own influence for good and bad. Only now does it make sense to believe in the "world conspiracy" of a small, evil elite. And is this phenomenon particularly pronounced in places where the friction between science and religion is even greater and secularization is not yet as advanced as in western countries?

Australian Islamic scholar Matthew Gray notes a predominance of conspiracy beliefs in the Arab world. Anti-Semitic agitation in particular is widespread and can be found in films, school books, and political or religious speeches. Above all, these beliefs explain those countries' challenging position as developing nations as the result of dark machinations by an external enemy. Egyptian political scientist and columnist Abd Al-Munim Said put it this way, according to an article in the National Review: "The biggest problem with conspiracy theories is that they not only shield us from the truth, but also from addressing our weaknesses and problems."

However, the psychological relief benefit of conspiracy beliefs seems to have a catch: according to the British social psychologist Karen M. Douglas, conspiracy theories serve urgent needs but do not satisfy them in the long run. Like an addiction, what needs to be overcome – especially feelings of powerlessness – is strengthened in the long term.

Distrust grows when you cultivate it. The growing skepticism towards all socially transmitted knowledge increases one's own insecurity and estranges one from many people. Is this a price that many conspiracy believers may accept in order to feel special? At least the social psychologist Roland Imhoff and his team were able to demonstrate in a series of studies that conspiracy believers want to experience themselves as extraordinary individuals. The more contradictions they experience, the more it reinforces their sense of uniqueness. Exclusion is reinterpreted as an award.

The stories of the scapegoat

However, rather than inventing original and personal stories, conspiracy believers fall back on long familiar rumors that strongly appeal to emotions about dark plots.

A long-lived example is the alleged conspiracy of sinister ritual and child murderers:

“As for the ceremonies when new members are admitted, the details are as repulsive as they are well known. [...] Then – it is horrible – they greedily drink the child's blood and fight over the parts of his body. "

This passage of text could just as well have come from an early modern writing about the "witch cult" or an 4chan-Posting concerning QAnon. In fact, however, it can be found in the late antiquity text “Octavius” which at that time described widespread accusations against the early Christians. The so-called "ritual murder legend" is ancient: a minority is believed to carry out horrific, secret, black magic crimes against the children of the majority. In the Middle Ages, Jews in particular were victims of those rumors, which were used to justify evictions and lynchings. In the early modern period, everyone could be suspected of being a ritual killer in the wake of the "witch craze".

In the “Malleus Maleficarum” (Hammer of Witches), the authoritative document for the persecution of witches published in 1487, the “witches” are thought to be able to make a “flying ointment” out of the extremities of children. The extensive three-part ecclesiastical law, whose linguistics and rhetoric were closely aligned with the scientific knowledge of the time, is based on the structure of the “Malleus Judaeorum” (Hammer of Jews), which is over 60 years older than the “Malleus Maleficarum”. This is what the religious and political scientist Michael Blume points out in his essay "Adrenochrome and Satanic Cults".

The latest version of the ritual murder legend accuses an elite of Hollywood stars, politicians, bankers, and top managers, through their international child trafficking ring, of sexually exploiting and torturing hundreds of thousands of children in order to produce adrenaline in their bodies and then extract adrenochrome, a metabolic product of adrenaline that is said to be rejuvenating.

Accusatory rumors are used politically

The Nazis made targeted and extensive use of the blood libel. With reference to the conspiracy theory book "The Truth About the Jewish Ritual Murders", Himmler wrote in a letter to Kaltenbrunner, the head of the SS police security: "I am thinking of publishing these ritual murder cases in our press in order to facilitate the removal of the Jews.” He also advised connecting missing children in “our channels” with Jewish ritual murders. On the one hand, Himmler and Hitler believed the accusatory rumors about a Jewish conspiracy, but they also deliberately used it as propaganda to implement their plans.

Stalin also spread conspiracy rumors during the “Great Terror” from 1936 to 1939 and had millions of people shot or taken to labor camps. Under torture, many of the often indiscriminately selected victims testified that they were actually anti-Soviet conspirators. Until his death, Stalin had Jews persecuted as "rootless cosmopolitans" and "Zionist conspirators". He was also able to rely on basic communist writings—the guidelines of the Communist International of 1919 end with a call for violence that contains this sentence: "Down with the Imperialist Conspiracy of Capital!"

Since 1951, the Dimitroff doctrine, which is also disparagingly referred to as "agent theory", has been taught in the GDR in history classes and studies nationwide: Hitler and his closest followers were mainly financed by "financial capital" and the "large industrialists" and were ultimately their agents. Followers of this Vulgar Marxist interpretation of history often assumed that "financial capital" was mainly Jewish bankers.

Even today, belief in conspiracies is used politically: the New Right spreads the fear of a planned “White Genocide", especially by Muslims. The AfD top politician Gauland said in a speech on June 2, 2016: "It is an attempt to gradually replace the German people with a population that has come from all over the world." With this accusatory rumor, the current government can be portrayed as negligent or standing against its own people while one simultaneously presents oneself as a savior. It is also cultivated by other high-ranking AfD politicians such as Alice Weidel, Björn Höcke, Beatrix von Storch or Peter Boehringer. On page 15 of the AfD’s party program, in the typical jargon of conspiracy believers (see Michael Butter: "Nothing is as it seems: on conspiracy theories.” Suhrkamp, Berlin 2018, p. 175.), the "undesirable developments of the past few years" are attributed to an unspecified "small, powerful leadership group within the parties".

Even in a shortened critique of capitalism, which is common in various political camps, there is at least an admixture of conspiracy beliefs: wars, hunger, and poverty go back to a more or less coordinated conspiracy of old white men—the one percent, the rich, the powerful, lobbyists, gamers, and corporate bosses consciously benefit from the misery. The bad guys are always the others.When it comes to those attitudes the left is no exception. Tom Uhlig, for example, explains in his essay "Anti-Semitism in the Left" that the left also has a noticeable tendency towards anti-Semitic conspiracy rumors.

Who is currently more dangerous?

There is no doubt: conspiracy believers can be extremely annoying through missionary encroachment, aggressive self-victimization ("You want to silence me!"), rejecting arguments, and circular logic ("Of course Gates is behind Corona, he benefits from it!").

It is also questionable whether such discussions are generally constructive. The Americanist Michael Butter, who heads a research project on the analysis of conspiracy theories, refers in an interview with The Standard to empirical studies that show that conspiracy theorists believe even more in their ideas when confronted with conclusive counter-evidence.

Currently, "lockdown protests" and "democratic resistance" are also scaring many people: during a pandemic, it becomes particularly clear that one is dependent on the reasonable behavior of others; despite all efforts to expand the capacity of the hospitals, the number of intensive care beds in an emergency is finite. All the more reason to get angry about people like Alex Jones, who have turned conspiracy beliefs into a business model. Nevertheless, it would be a massive cutback to throw into one pot all conspiracy believers, self-stagers, far-right extremists, and people who declare awkward doubts or are overwhelmed.

In a way, one could even be grateful to the conspiracy believers: their statements invite one to justify one's own belief in science and authority or to formulate it more modestly. The confrontation with the content of their beliefs can lead to a reflection on one's own position, to self-questioning: how is knowledge conveyed, how great is the value of trust in the face of the abyss of ignorance, uncertainty, and preliminary knowledge that is the result of a pandemic infection and a virus little researched because it is so new?

And wouldn't it be even more chilling if there were no protests and no skepticism about government measures that had a deep impact on privacy, especially since the vast majority of people cannot objectively assess the data situation behind them? As repulsive as one can find the behavior of many conspiracy believers – and as much as I myself wish for many more constructive protests for itinerant farmers and refugees, a profound reform of the meat processing industry, solidarity with the homeless, the mentally ill, the elderly, and the disabled – demands for closed ranks and an undisputed belief in authorities and experts would hardly be more sympathetic in an open society because there's something totalitarian about them.

In an ironic twist, the conspiracy believers are currently the scapegoats in the Corona crisis. To presume that because of their participation in demonstrations they could be responsible for a possible increase in the infection rate, would only absolve the majority of their accusers' own potentially negligent behavior. The central question of the next few months will most likely not be: how stupid are these tinfoil hat wearers? Rather, in how trustworthy, honest, non-violent, and seriously solidaric will the supposedly enlightened rest of the audience behave?

P.S. The two cognitive scientists Stephan Lewandowsky (University of Bristol) and John Cook (George Mason University) published a small handbook on conspiracy myths in March 2020. It is easy to understand, especially the questions about how to recognize conspiracy myths and how to counter them. It can be found here.

P.P.S. The 21-page "Guide to Conspiracy Theories" from the research project headed by Michael Butter for comparative analysis of conspiracy theories can be found here.

P.P.P.S. The murders in Pakistan show that opponents of vaccination can be much more rabid than in Germany. See here and here.

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