

ON CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND REAL SCIENCE

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Alien sex, vaccine microchips, Covid-19 and climate change as elaborate hoax inventions by powerful literati to control millions. The conspiracy theories get wilder and wilder by the minute. Many people seem to be sympathetic to them and some even seem to believe them. There are even those who while skeptical of the skeptics, wonder if there might be some truth in conspiracy theories.

As a philosopher of science who has thought and read and discussed the nature of science and belief, as well as the social and historical conditions of knowledge for most of his adult life (call that thirty years if you like), I am absolutely fascinated by these kinds of beliefs. How can individuals, some of whom are intelligent and well-meaning, believe things based on effectively no evidence? Why do they want to believe this? What is the sexiness of conspiracy theories?

There are some good pieces out there beginning to address some of the latent psychological yearnings for believing a whole slew of conspiracy theories. One piece I like is <https://medium.com/interfaith-now/why-your-christian-friends-and-family-members-are-so-easily-fooled-by-conspiracy-theories-5c36a835ef07>. There is also a new book about to come out which sounds quite promising: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/aug/01/carl-bergstrom-people-are-using-data-to-bullshit>

Even so, anticipating Covid-19 vaccines and fine-tuned treatments, I'd like to call for public health advocacy designed to challenge anti-vax conspiracies to accelerate achieving herd immunity. I wonder whether part of the reasons for the growth of conspiracy theories might be the general cultural attitudes towards science. Most of the people I love don't really care about science. Many studied it during their teenage years to an extent but few specialized during their university years, if they even went to university. Further, in the various cultures I know north and south of the Rio Grande, and on the old European continent, science is some kind of hush-hush. It is not really a cool or attractive career or achievement. Basically

no one cares about the history of science. Being a lawyer, businessman or rock star is way cooler. Sure, engineers and doctors have high street creed. I admit it. But that's primarily because they DO stuff. They fix your broken bones or cancer or computer. Who cares about basic knowledge, or about HOW we even KNOW what we think we walk around and know about the universe? Science is some weird nerdy stuff that does nothing good in the world.

I think this blasé and frankly fairly ignorant set of beliefs about the nature and place of science in society goes a long way in accounting for why conspiracy do so well and are even sometimes considered on a par with our best science: cosmology, neuroscience, and genetics. This equalization of science and conspiracy theories and “believe whatever you want to believe” just seems bizarre to me. Let 1,000 flowers bloom sure. But even one year studying the philosophy of science, science's empirical methods, and its experimental protocols and theorizing methods, should convince open-minded and well-intentioned individuals that hypotheses and claims always already require empirical grounding. Even if there can usefully be differences of interpretation, you cannot fairly hide behind spin doctored and non-empirical stories fabricating your claims out of control. Science is really hard and is specialized work requiring good common sense and subject to community wide checks and balances. Science is not made up. Conspiracy theories are.

I don't know what else to say. I always recommend Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, Ian Hacking, Helen Longino and so forth if anyone asks me for recommendations in the philosophy of science. I also recently published a book, *When Maps Become the World*, which is a kind of introduction to how science works (<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/W/bo45713064.html>). My central thesis is that science is an overarching mapping project of the world. Scientists make many maps of a complex world and in so doing the world can change. I realize that few people will ever read any of this stuff, much less find it compelling. In all honesty, if you want to walk around and make claims about how the world hangs together—that Covid or climate change are invented hoaxes—then you really do need to pay attention to what very smart people have said and written and discovered about how imperfect humans acquire and test knowledge. You must learn some philosophy of science and epistemology (even some statistics perhaps, perish the thought!). I am here if you want to talk and engage in empirically grounded critical discourse. And please stop calling a tiny, proven virus and an immense thermodynamic disaster hoaxes. They are real. In fact, they are interrelated. Let us get to work to fight these imminent dangers. Welcome to the world of science.