

# On the Psychology of Conspiracy Theories

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I was working on trying to understand what conspiracy theories are all about, before reading Paul Barber's recent *Self & Society* article (Barber, 2020). I appreciate that Paul's piece is a nuanced and self-reflective take on the subject, and far from the far-fetched, 'mad' end of the spectrum of conspiracy theories. But I do think it expresses some of the difficulties I want to discuss in this article. I also accept that those in power often want to shut down debate by using 'conspiracy theories' as a derogatory dismissal, but the power behind this critique is based on something real, and this is what I want to explore, i.e. this unconscious process of projecting out our anxiety on to a malevolent 'them'.

Conspiracy theories seem to be taking over the world at the moment, and this is not a good thing: it is causing much damage, individually and societally. Yes, wealth and power are always trying to manipulate the media for their own nefarious ends; politicians always 'spin' and often lie, the smoking, fossil fuel, pharmaceuticals and many business lobbies have spent, and are spending, huge sums putting out knowingly false propaganda, and this has done untold damage to people across, and to, the globe. And, yes, there have been many instances of 'conspiracy theories' turning out to be true. The trouble starts, though, when this turns into a projective process, rather than being a search for the truth. Obviously, there is a middle ground here where it can be both, making it difficult to tease out what is coming from where. But it is also clear that many of these theories have left the realm of even remote reality and, as such, are obviously compulsive in nature.

My fear is about the corrosive effect that these projections have in undermining science and some level of accepted truth that we need for social integration. It is clear to me that the movement towards needing to find an 'enemy out there' is driven by unconscious forces of a compulsive and compensatory nature. So much of what goes wrong in the world happens due to what can be called 'cock-up theory'; i.e. that people are unconscious

and asleep, and caught in their own trauma with all its compensatory compulsive consequences and actions that go on to create the myriad of unintended consequences we are surrounded by.

If you want to see how unaware and asleep most people are, do watch the Netflix film, *The Social Dilemma*. It elucidates brilliantly how social media companies have managed to understand and manipulate our dopamine reward systems, as well as our unconscious trauma, fight/flight/freeze responses, to keep people addicted to a compulsive reactivity. This is depowering and degenerative. It is designed so that our attention is constantly grabbed and pulled down and away from integrating the self. It is debilitating and dehumanising. The film also makes clear how the structure of social media causes conspiracy theories to grow exponentially through this encouragement of these 'base' reactions. It is exacerbating our culture wars and ripping our societies apart in the process.

It is the attachment to threat that is such a powerful aspect of all this. Our fight/flight/freeze responses get triggered and fed so effectively by conspiracy theories, with the fear of Covid 19 compounding it all. But please also look at Eva Schonveld's article 'Politics, trauma and empathy: breakthrough to a politics of the heart?', which wonderfully clarifies how it is the trauma from generations of vicious hierarchy and colonialism that keeps us unaware, blind, and obsessed with our insecurities.

So, how do we find the line between what needs to be investigated and held open, as possibly true, and what is emerging from some unconscious projective process which needs to be understood as such? The answer to this is surely a ruthlessly honest self-enquiry using the whole of ourselves. We have our head's ability to analyse objectively and use the widest perspectives for comparison and evaluation, which is after all the process of science. But this alone is not enough: we need the same ruthlessly honest enquiry about our heart as well. What is my agenda? What is motivating me to want to think in the way I am? Is my heart closing and tensing in

defence, and if so in relationship to what? Lastly, our body provides us with a wonderfully objective response indicator: it shows how much of what I am engaged in is about tension and adrenaline-fuelled stress responses.

Our head needs to be active and engaged in enquiring, and not merely acting as a function of our compulsive feelings. This is what science is about, teasing out the best truth we can. Arguing with science's at times blinkered and defensive status quo orthodoxy is simply insisting on better science, a process that has been going on for centuries. But then I hear the cry saying that science has all sorts of competing 'proofs', many derived from science corrupted by political and economic agendas. At its worst science can be likened to the cliché about how 'you can prove anything with statistics'. But let's not 'chuck the baby out with the bath water': science is about finding the best truth we can, and to undermine this is to head back into the Dark Ages, a world of superstition and magic that I am sure nobody wants, and few, I think, understand the consequences of.

There are also a couple of 'keys' we can use here. One is about seeing which 'theories' are supported by obvious, common-sense levels of motivation. With some it is clear the motivations get stretched into the ridiculous. The other is when the degree of control and manipulation needed to support the 'theory' becomes fantastical. The idea of some 'evil cabal' organising the world comes up against the fact that, first, nobody is smart enough to pull it off, and secondly, as Jeff Goldblum argued in *Jurassic Park*, life is inherently uncontrollable, chaotic and with an unstoppable creativity. The rich and powerful are no more 'enlightened' or 'in control of life' than the rest of us, however much they might think they are. As in our personal lives, so in society – attempts to control everything are in the end doomed to failure.

Then there is checking out our heart. What is the force behind the level of identification with *any* particular theory? Behind all of our 'forceful' identifications there is a psychological need, and such needs have their roots in trauma and its inevitable anxiety and insecurity. These identifications are projections of anxiety and behind which is the trapped hurt, fear, and the distress of trauma. If I have been overly criticised in childhood, I am going to be far more reactive to criticism as an

adult. Anger is so often an instant defence mechanism triggered to protect an unconscious hurt. But what is the wound behind conspiracy theories?

I think these theories emerge from a very deep level of anxiety; they attach to a story that reinforces the anxiety in a self-feeding vicious circle. As Richard Seymour (2020) put it,

Apocalyptic conspiracy thinking is, above all, a theodicy: it explains evil, and says what will be done about evil. The 'end of times' thinking that is sweeping the US, and justifying every new outrage, is the theodicy of groups frightened of losing their power and arming themselves to defend it.

Looking around at those who get involved with this process I often see a typical lack of balance, a sense that they come from backgrounds, like mine, that lacked love and / or had a surfeit of criticism and punishment. People with lots of anger and blame are struggling with unconscious hurt. Those who experienced enough love and support are more creative and positive in their outlook and relationship to life.

When any of us are caught by, and identified with, our victim hurt place, the world seems like a negative and threatening place. However, I think that the anxiety feeding conspiracy theories probably comes from a very young age. When trauma happens so early in life that it disrupts 'healthy attachment', it makes it difficult as an adult to integrate them. Bringing such experiences to consciousness is tough: there are no memories or frameworks available that would enable the anxiety to be seen, recognised and integrated. A baby not getting its needs met has no understanding of what is going on; there is just 'wrongness', and this gets internalised and stuck inside. So understanding what is being struggled with is hard: there is just this force of unease, of anxiety, of feeling that the world is bad, predatory or malevolent in some way. Such anxiety is only one stage away from paranoia.

When we continue to identify with, and indulge in, these compulsive expressions of anxiety, it can become a vicious circle of increasingly negative consequences. Hopefully at some point, reality impinges, but this is the same fragile place, though, that allows people to get sucked into cults, with all the difficulties involved in breaking free from such 'mind control'. As research has shown, those caught

up in conspiracy theories are more likely to get carried away into violence and destructive behaviour.<sup>1</sup> A huge amount of energy gets caught up in the identification, and when this energy gets confronted by difference, or reality, it can be like an ordinary wave hitting a submerged shelf, suddenly rearing upwards.

All this fits with a recent Crowdsience programme<sup>2</sup> about why people become conspiracy theorists. In one section they look at the neuroscience of this phenomena and how we are programmed to see meaning in patterns in all aspects of our experience, as part of our defensive alarm system. Those engaged in conspiracy theories because of the anxiety mentioned above have over-sensitive alarm systems; they are seeing connections that do not exist. This goes along with holding on to rigid thought patterns, which are the obvious consequence of insecurity. Ask my wife about my past stubbornness and arrogance.

Questioning agendas and motivations around everything is of course essential, and this led me to questioning my own motivation for writing this article and engaging in dialogue around it. I could see that my fear was around not wanting sanity to be defeated by the madness of conspiracy theories. They feel to me like a road to hell where human development towards Consciousness and Love are in danger of being defeated by the regressive forces of fear, hate and magical thinking. The trauma of defeatedness is also surely one of the hooks for conspiracy theorists as well: it is about getting caught into an unconscious rebellion against the deep wounds of having been defeated, with all the attendant feelings of powerlessness.

I could however see that there was also another level to this for me in the anger I felt towards conspiracy theorists. When I really looked at this, I was judging them for their 'narcissistic, arrogant need to be right'. Then it became clear that I was rejecting this shadow aspect of myself. During the time it took me to realise this, I even started justifying my 'right' position. My hypocrisy was humiliating, I needed to face my own compensatory projection from my wounds around 'not being good enough'. Seeing this has helped me forgive myself, and conspiracy theorists.

Our compulsive identifications are always narcissistic in nature: they put the person 'in the

know', make them feel 'special' and 'in control'. Narcissism and control are always there when we have been deeply wounded and defeated. The huge power of the mind to reinforce its 'rightness', by selectively seeing the patterns in the data it wants to, is especially true for us narcissists. This is why I feel safer when I am standing on the ground of uncertainty, of not-knowing. But this is the dilemma: it also feels important to resist the world being overrun by the 'dark forces' of conspiracy theories. They may start out as a legitimate questioning of what is presented as mainstream accepted facts, which is perfectly fine; but when our anxiety attaches to ideas of 'dark malevolent forces', we are in danger of losing the plot and sliding down the slippery the slope towards 'magical thinking'.

As Charles Eisenstein (2020) puts it, at the extreme, '...they say, everything we are told is a lie, and the world is in the grip of evil'. This only helps to deepen our anxiety and drive us further towards madness. He does, though, usefully articulate how conspiracy theories are myths that express the loss of trust in science, experts and authority. But again, how do we then know what is true? This is the great cry of our 'Postmodern' age, and this has its legitimacy because developmentally we have needed to challenge the ossified anchors that science and rationality had become. Ken Wilber argues that these difficulties are an inevitable aspect of working through our 'Postmodern' age, with our current 'culture wars' reflecting this real struggle.

Science, the Enlightenment, Modernity – however you name it – has been really hard won over several centuries. This vital stage in human development must not be lost by some massive regression into the magic and superstition of previous eras. So while the rejection of 'experts' and 'science' worldwide has its positive side, it is also dangerous. We need better science, not no science. As Wilber puts it, each stage of development needs to 'transcend and *include*' the previous one. After 'Modernism' comes our current 'Postmodernism', which is deeply anti-hierarchical in its understanding of the relativity of everything. This is necessary, but it does have this tendency of wanting to destroy and reject science, rationality and all hierarchies. The leading edge of our current development is moving into the next developmental stage, labelled 'Integral'. Here we are able to hold multi perspectives and see the reality of these developmental levels.

It is unfortunately common that many people who are open and connected to the ‘spiritual’, ‘humanistic’ or ‘transpersonal’ dimension of life get caught into rejecting science (partly, I think, because science has not yet reached its maturity and is therefore not yet able to speak to these areas). Again, energetically it is so attractive to go with our compulsive and compensatory self-justificatory ways of being. Covid has accentuated our fear, exacerbating our regressive, archaic, default, trauma ways of being.

I hope and trust that we can avoid being re-submerged in the darkness of tribalism and superstition and continue our journey towards ‘Integral’ by using the support and sanity of science, by understanding the relativity of everything as well as through the support of glimpsing the unity of Love and Consciousness and Energy at the heart of Being itself.

Our traumata were caused by the deficit of love, so the whole story is really about love. We need each other as we open to love, and it is surely more profoundly infectious than fear, and eventually, more powerful. If we can integrate the three aspects of ourselves – ‘unconditional Love’ (through self-forgiveness and compassion), ‘objective Consciousness’ (through separating ourselves from our reactivity by seeing how it is an expression of woundedness), and ‘embodied Energy’ (through the space and connection of mindfulness) – we can grow and develop. We can free ourselves from our defensive, compensatory attachment to fear, from seeing the world as a hostile place that is ‘out to get us’, from narcissistically over-interpreting life as conspiring against us personally.

How to respond to all this? I want to keep my heart open, which means allowing my suffering and working to integrate my fear. I want to see others’ fight/flight/freeze trauma responses and negativity in terms of lack of love. Then I have a chance of connecting to the Love behind it all, to its tender vulnerability and fragility, as well as its power. It is this that diminishes anxiety, and brings trust in the wonderful innate goodness of human beings, of life and the cosmos.

## Notes

- 1 As discussed on ‘The Inquiry’, BBC Radio 4, 1 August 2020.
- 2 BBC World Service, 31 July 2020.

## References

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