

# Unbelievable

Tony Sobrado asks if conspiracy theories, apart from being founded on debatable evidence, can even stand up to being called theories. – pseudoscience on top of pseudotheory?

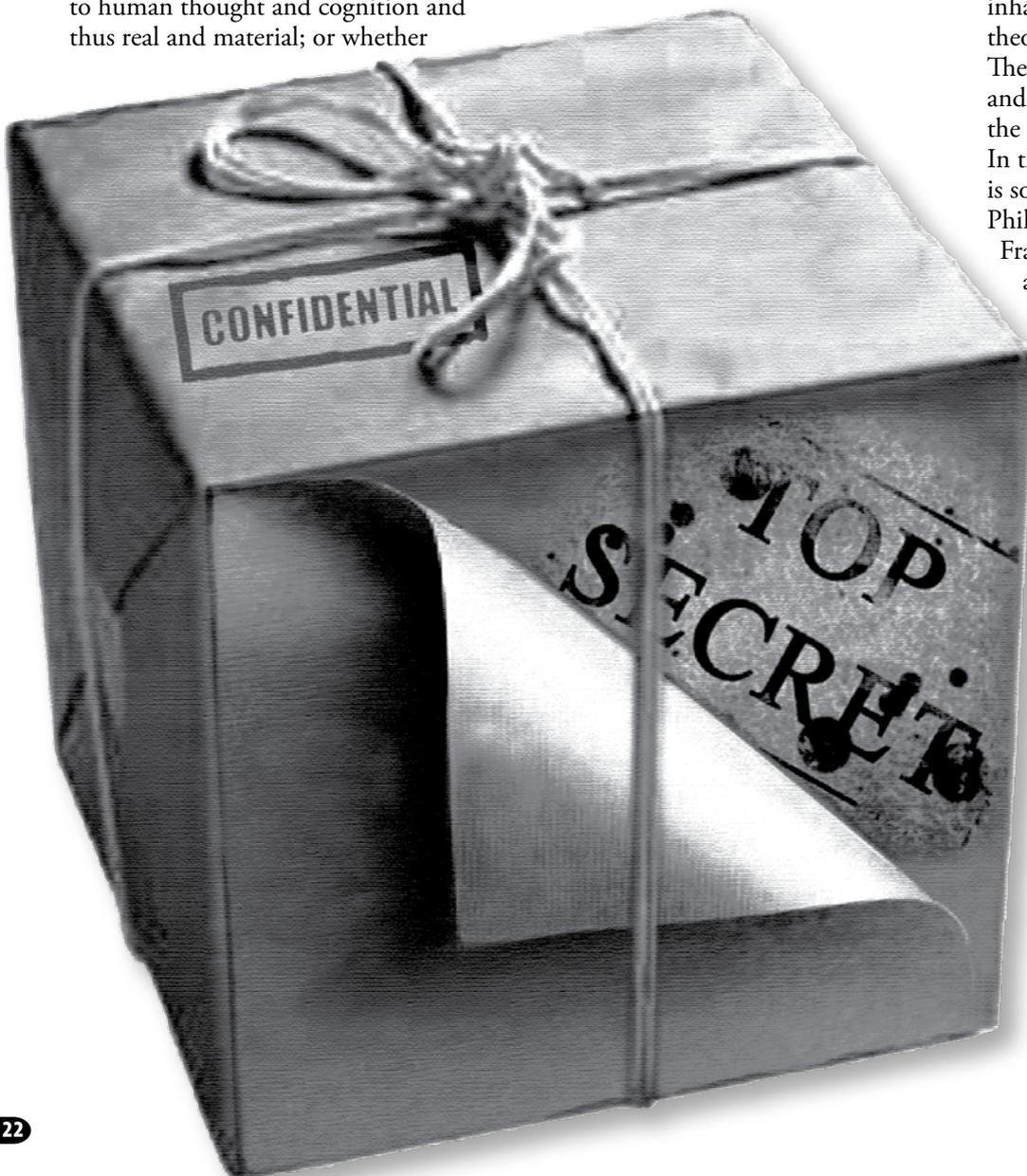
Theory is often regarded a systematic framework formed of concepts that analytically account for phenomena observed. Philosophers for centuries have debated whether the 'goings on' observed are external to human thought and cognition and thus real and material; or whether

they are constructs of the mind, logically assembled and maintained by the exercising of reason with no independent reality.

Theory is applied in both the social and natural sciences. In the social

sciences disputes emerge, once again, between those who advocate that there is a real material world outside the remit of the observer and those who propose that the social sciences can only be understood internally by its inhabitants, resulting in normative theories that encompass Political Theory as well as historical, social and anthropological paradigms under the broader domain of hermeneutics. In the natural sciences the matter is somewhat different. Although Philosophers of Science such as Van Frassen advocate a scientific image along with anti-realism, most would accept that the methodological practice of the natural sciences is to generate hypotheses that form, or derive from, an overarching theory. This runs parallel to the process of validating the phenomena in question with the eventual goal of producing a correlation between the explanans and the explanandum, even if it is a tentative stab at 'reality'.

Classifying both the social and natural sciences as science, with the use of theory, means that the procedures regarding evidence, verification and explanation take the same abstract steps even though the physicist is completely divorced from the world he studies as where the sociologist, by the nature of human existence and the definition of the discipline, is inescapably part of the phenomena he studies, society. Nonetheless the issues that arise





for both the sciences centre around preemption; when there is more than one theory competing for the explanation of the phenomena at hand or theoretical redundancy; when there is a theory that explains certain aspects of a phenomenon but not every time nor in every context. This coupled with using empirical data to warrant the application and validation of theory means that both the social and natural sciences constantly refine their hypotheses and make predictions for future outcomes.

### THEORY AND PSEUDOTHEORY

These are the formal understandings and usage of theory across the spectrum of science and this is what sets both theory apart from pseudosocial theory and science apart from pseudo science. It is for this very reason that conspiracy theory is a pseudosocial theory. Firstly, take one of the Holy Grails of the scientific method: prediction. These abound in the natural sciences, ranging from how, when, and why your PC will turn on to planes flying and equations of time and space. The social sciences tread a more precarious and unreliable ground. However, through the collection of data based on conceptualised variables along with statistical models of causation, predictions can be levied. Anyone who has an investment portfolio can see the benefits of employing time series and regression analysis in economics although the latest financial crises illustrates that these predictions are far from completely accurate.

Conspiracy theory, as a serious ontological and epistemological alternative to social phenomena, must provide predictions, demonstrate their applicability and warrant evidence that at least renders their explanations as plausible or highly likely. Although in the social sciences these do not map out exactly due to the nature of the measurement of artificially constructed social variables, conspiracy theory fails spectacularly regarding the relationship between observed phenomena, the use of reliable and relevant data and thus explanation and prediction.

Meta conspiracy theories come

with an ensemble of predictions for the future. These range from totalitarian one-world governments to alien control to the accession of spiritual enlightenment in other dimensions and planes of existence. However, there are no time limits placed on these predicted occurrences, only weak inductive inferences. Consequently as a readily defensible claim, conspiracy theorists have the grace of an ever-winding clock on their side with limitless time as a luxury for “if it does not happen today it will happen tomorrow”. These are often the arguments employed by classic Marxists, that there is no time frame specified for the proletariat revolution but it will happen one day. Yet it is for these same reasons, that in this context, both Marxism and conspiracy theories are pseudo scientific theories as neither is falsifiable - that is, their falsity cannot be demonstrated. As a consequence, they stay in the realm of mere speculation.

With this outcome we find the position of scientific theory versus unfalsifiable theory. I have argued elsewhere that conspiracy theory is a form of political theory and philosophy. Yet conspiracy theory is not even competitively viable as a political and social theory. To further grapple with these issues one has to look at the implications of the use of theory in the social sciences, the area in which conspiracy theory is attempting to operate.

### SOCIAL PHENOMENA

Whether one is a structuralist, a functionalist, a critical theorist or a postmodernist, one can look at social phenomena and at least readily apply identifiable frameworks to these “goings on” grounded in, one way or another, the use of data and evidence. Thus a discourse analyst would look at how issues of insanity are constructed in the reports of clinical psychologists themselves, which bring these conceptual frameworks into existence.



From the position of the social sciences, the above schools of thought share the same standpoint in terms of theoretical frameworks. This is that there is a phenomenon to be explained and one applies a theory that can be backed up by some sort of evidence, even though the constitution of evidence in the social sciences is an elusive activity.

**“ Conspiracy theory must provide predictions, demonstrate applicability and warrant evidence.”**

Conspiracy theory operates in reverse, with paradoxical tendencies in terms of both phenomena observed and epistemology. This is because, by its

very nature, conspiracy theory runs contrary to the ‘goings on observed’ in terms of widely accepted explanations. It is therefore a polemic contrarian to widely held explanations that are presented. It advocates a ‘behind the scenes’ explanation for what is really going on. Financial meltdown, civil unrest and governmental issues are not caused by idioms advocated by social science but are a deliberately conspired plot executed in the background that most are not aware of. Conspiracy theory and political theory both use aspects of observable data yet conspiracy theorists add the stipulation of a deliberately falsified social reality: that what is really going on does not match the accepted explanations or observations and thus in turn the accepted explanations and observations are not what is really going on. Both

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the facets of the argument cyclically depend on each other. Furthermore, one has to look at the ‘real’ phenomena (pre-planned conspiracy) behind the observable phenomena (political and social activity) making the ‘real’ conspiratorial phenomena paradoxically unobservable.

This then leads to the paradox in conspiracy theory with regards to observed social phenomena and epistemology. This is that the observed phenomenon is allocated to the realm of conspiratorial explanation. The explanation encapsulates the activity of cabalist agents operating illustrious tricks of misdirection yet simultaneously these grand tricks are not only detected by conspiracy theorists but also are fully deciphered. We are thus left with a logical dissonance because the conspirators are both fully competent and almost omnipotent like in that they can control all facets of social activity but are completely inept in the maintenance of secrecy as they leave an amassed trail of clues behind for conspirators to find. Epistemologically it is difficult to see how conspiracy theorists obtain and validate their knowledge vis-a-vis observed social phenomena that is supposedly attributed to all-powerful secret agents.

## MALLEABILITY OF PSEUDOTHEORY

The final part of conspiracy theory as pseudoscientific theory is its malleability in the face of empirical data. When

evidence and data does not match a theory in science, the theory is either reformulated or discarded. This is the same in conspiracy theory, where the theories themselves evolve and adapt to take account of newly emerging evidence.

We have seen this with the 911 Truth movement constantly evolving their theory in the face of ever increasing evidence from structural engineers for how the twin towers collapsed by fire. However, when theory is adapted in science, the fit between theory and evidence is refined and tightened so that the theory matches the data in a more succinct, interlocked and plausible way. In part, this is the reason why the falsifiability of a theory is imperative.

Conspiracy theorists attempt the same execution, in which the conspiracy theory will then match the observable data in a correlated manner. Yet again, however, the theory runs in the opposite direction, moving further away from the evidence presented towards elaborating and embellishing the conspiracy theory further. This expands the existing conspiracy theory even though it no longer configures with the available evidence. For instance, take the Skull and Bones theory that the US government and financial system is secretly run by an all-white boys club out of Yale University somewhat related to a Freemason secret organisation. What then happens when a black president out of Harvard takes up the office? The data does not quite fit the theory. Abandon the theory? No, reformulate it in the opposite direction that Obama must be a black Freemason.

What conspiracy theory does is more than just maintain an equation between theory and data in a reversal and contradictory manner but the schema of conspiracy theory means that in terms of psychological inference, all data becomes interpreted as conspiratorial phenomena. Therefore privilege is always given to theory over the observable data. This rarely happens in the sciences for when data no longer fits a theory, the latter soon becomes discarded. We have seen this throughout history from Copernicus to Edwin Hubble and a shift now beginning to emerge in terms of free market economics.

Conspiracy theory is intrinsically more dogmatic than theory in the social and natural sciences, producing disjointed explanations regarding theory and data. This makes conspiracy theory more of orthodox canon than a verifiable or applicable social, political or scientific theory. The constant malleability of conspiracy theory, its amalgamation of different pools of data that collectively fail to correlate to the conspiracy theory used in explanation, and thus neglecting the data and observed phenomena in question, are just some of the aspects that make conspiracy theory a pseudoscientific theory. ■

About the author:

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