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BOOK REVIEW

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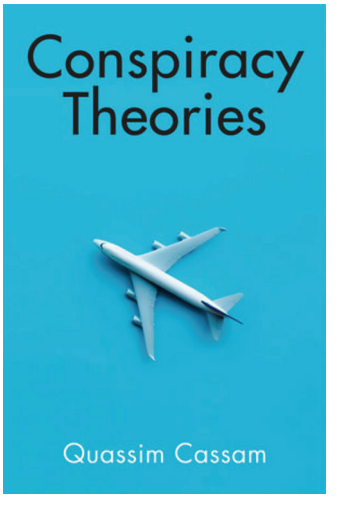
Quassim Cassam: *Conspiracy Theories*

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019, 140 s.



Quassim Cassam's *Conspiracy Theories* is part of a growing body of literature concerned with the epistemology and social impact of conspiracy thinking. While much previous scholarship has focused on the cognitive errors or historical patterns of conspiracy theorizing, Cassam takes a different approach. He argues that Conspiracy Theories (in his book, with capital C and T) are not merely intellectual failings but rather ideological tools designed to serve political ends. His central claim is that these theories function as political propaganda rather than as misguided attempts to uncover hidden truths. In doing so, Cassam shifts the debate away from discussions of rationality and irrationality and toward an analysis of how conspiracy theories operate within broader political and ideological struggles.

Cassam begins by distinguishing Conspiracy Theories from ordinary beliefs in actual conspiracies, whereby a small group of conspirators work together in secret to do something illegal or harmful. While real conspiracies undoubtedly exist – Watergate, Iran-Contra, and the Gunpowder Plot being notable examples – Conspiracy Theories, in his sense, are characterized by their speculative, contrarian, and self-sealing nature (p. 4). They are structured to resist falsification and to deepen suspicion rather than resolve uncertainty.

The book goes on to challenge the dominant psychological explanations of why people believe in Conspiracy Theories (p. 6). While studies in cognitive science suggest that belief in these theories stems from biases such as confirmation bias, intentionality bias, and proportionality bias, Cassam argues that these explanations are incomplete. He contends that conspiracy thinking is best understood as an ideological stance rather than as a psychological disposition.

The book further explores the dangers of Conspiracy Theories, arguing that they corrode trust in experts and institutions, undermine democratic decision-making, and sometimes lead to real-world harm. In his final chapter, Cassam proposes a three-pronged strategy for countering Conspiracy Theories: rebuttal, education, and "outing" their political function. He argues that direct refutation often fails, as true believers are unlikely to be persuaded by rational arguments alone. Instead, he suggests that exposing the political agendas underlying Conspiracy Theories may be a more effective approach (p. vii).

Cassam's thesis is provocative and persuasive in many ways. I find his emphasis on the political nature of Conspiracy Theories to be particularly compelling. Conspiracy narratives have long been used as instruments of political manipulation, from The Protocols of the Elders of Zion to modern QAnon conspiracy theories. Cassam is right to argue that many conspiracy theories are not simply mistaken beliefs but are actively promoted by vested interests to serve ideological ends.

However, I think his claim that Conspiracy Theories are *basically* a form of political propaganda is an empirical one that requires further substantiation. He seems to assume that the ideological function of conspiracy theories is their defining feature, but I think this assumption needs to be defended more rigorously. If Conspiracy Theories are fundamentally political, then one would expect most, if not all, of them to be tied to clear political agendas. But this is not always the case.

Take, for example, conspiracy theories surrounding Big Pharma. Many anti-vaccine activists believe that pharmaceutical companies are knowingly pushing harmful vaccines to maximize their profits. While some of these theories intersect with libertarian or anti-government ideologies, the core claim – that corporations prioritize profits over public health – is not necessarily tied to a specific political movement. Unlike, say, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, which clearly serve to scapegoat a particular group, anti-vaccine conspiracy theories often emerge from broader distrust of powerful institutions rather than from a specific ideological framework. If Cassam is right that conspiracy thinking is primarily political, then where do such theories fit? Are they simply apolitical aberrations, or do they indicate that conspiracy thinking can stem from structural mistrust that is not necessarily political in nature? I think this is a significant question that his account does not fully address.

I also agree with Cassam's argument that conspiracy thinking is best understood as an ideology rather than as a personality trait (p. 28). The idea

that conspiracy theorists are simply "irrational" or "paranoid" oversimplifies a complex phenomenon. Many conspiracy theories, as Cassam notes, are grounded in a deep-seated conviction that elites are systematically deceiving the public. This worldview is not just a collection of independent beliefs but a coherent ideological stance – one that predisposes individuals to interpret events in a way that confirms their existing suspicions.

But again, I think Cassam's framing is too narrowly focused on politics. The distrust underlying conspiracy ideation is not limited to governments and political actors; it extends to corporations, scientific institutions, and even cultural elites. Conspiracists target not only politicians but also medical professionals, climate scientists, and academic experts. If conspiracy thinking is an ideology, then it seems to be one of generalized anti-elitism rather than a purely political instrument.

One factor that Cassam does not explore in depth is the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of conspiracy theories. In my view, journalistic practices play a significant role in the spread of conspiracy narratives, particularly through their commitment to "balance" and "objectivity." Many mainstream media outlets, in an attempt to present both sides of a debate, give undue legitimacy to fringe theories.

This is especially problematic in cases where one side of the debate is overwhelmingly supported by scientific consensus. Studies have shown that media coverage of the vaccine-autism controversy, for instance, has contributed to public skepticism about vaccine safety. A Cornell University study (Clarke 2008) found that between 1998 and 2006, nearly half of American media articles on vaccines presented both pro- and anti-vaccine perspectives as if they were equally credible. Later studies (Dixon – Clarke 2013) found that readers exposed to such "balanced" reporting were significantly more likely to believe in a vaccine-autism link than those who read one-sided articles presenting the scientific consensus. This suggests that the way conspiracy theories are framed in the media can significantly influence public attitudes. Cassam's book would have benefited from a more detailed discussion of these structural factors.

Another crucial issue that Cassam does not fully address is the role of the internet in amplifying conspiracy beliefs. In the digital age, conspiracy theories spread not only through traditional propaganda channels but also through decentralized networks of misinformation. Algorithmic personalization ensures that users are increasingly exposed to content that reinforces their preexisting beliefs, creating echo chambers that make conspiracy theories more

difficult to challenge. Research has shown that anti-vaccine websites, for example, are more likely to appear in search results than pro-vaccine sources, and even brief exposure to such content can increase vaccine hesitancy. This suggests that the success of conspiracy theories is not just a function of ideology or political manipulation but also of the digital infrastructure through which information is disseminated. A more comprehensive analysis of conspiracy thinking should take these technological factors into account.

Despite these limitations, *Conspiracy Theories* is a valuable contribution to the philosophical literature on the subject. Cassam's political analysis of conspiracy thinking offers an important corrective to purely psychological or epistemic explanations. His writing is clear, rigorous, and accessible, making the book a useful resource for both academic and general audiences. While I think his argument could be expanded to account for non-political forms of conspiracy belief and the structural factors that facilitate their spread, his central claim – that Conspiracy Theories function as ideological tools rather than mere epistemic failures – is both insightful and timely. The book raises important questions about the nature of misinformation in contemporary society, and while it does not answer all of them, it provides a strong foundation for further discussion.

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