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KARL HEPFER:

Verschwörungstheorien. Eine philosophische Kritik der Unvernunft  
[Conspiracy Theories: A Philosophical Criticism of Irrationality]  
Bielefeld, transcript Verlag 2021, 220 p. Third updated and revised edition.

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Conspiracy theories, rumours, speculations, or simple explanations of unclear phenomena and events have accompanied humanity since its birth. As Zuzana Panczová notes (2017: 36 ff.), there is evidence already from ancient times about narratives that explained social catastrophes as a consequence of the activities of some conspiracy groups. For instance, in ancient Rome, it was Christians, Jews, etc. Conspiracy theories do particularly well during periods of crises, and the coronavirus pandemic, which is currently plaguing all mankind, creates particularly fertile ground for disseminating “simple explanations”. Present-day communication media offer extraordinary opportunities for an accelerated spreading of any type of news. Indeed, in the case of electronic media, such spread is as fast as lightning and reaches out to an unlimited number of recipients. Conspiracy theories may directly affect people’s behaviour and actions, and their existence should therefore be taken seriously. Hence, it is no surprise that they have become the subject of research of several scientific disciplines since the middle of the last century.

The new book by Karl Hepfer approaches conspiracy theories from the philosophical perspective. It is a remarkable book whose success among its readers is proven by the fact that it has seen three repeated editions in a short time (1<sup>st</sup> edition in 2015, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 2017, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition in 2021). The last one appeared in the middle of the pandemic, which the author reflected on in his revised version. What can a philosopher’s perspective offer regarding this topic? Hepfer explains that he wishes to find out how conspiracy theories influence our understanding of reality. He deals with essentially ontological questions of what our knowledge of what in the world exists and what does not, aiming to provide the readers with appropriate methodological tools for analysing conspiracy theories.

The first part of the book provides an analysis of the conspiracy theory as a “theory”. According to the author, “theories are simplified models of reality” (p. 29). They aim to bring clear and logical answers to the asked questions which (usually) concern certain selected

phenomena of reality. From this perspective, there is no difference between scientific and conspiracy theories at first glance. Nevertheless, the first difference can be found in the contents of conspiracy theories, the basis of which is conspiracy. Hepfer analyses in greater detail what we can understand under conspiracy. He considers it an action that should take place in secret and with the involvement of an organised group of people. Nevertheless, the author himself immediately notes that not even the basis of the theory, which is conspiracy in this case, can be a proof of whether we are dealing with conspiracy theory or not. The problem is that, in certain cases, we cannot know, due to the lack of empirical data, whether it is or actually was conspiracy. At this point, another difference between a scientific theory and conspiracy theory joins the game – according to Hepfer, it is asymmetry, so typical of evidence. The researcher or, simply, the person that evaluates the theory should concentrate on the empirical data and the evidence derived from it. They would find out that, in some areas, there is a lack of them, they are not balanced, their sources cannot be verified, etc.

Another difference is the understanding of reality. Here, certainly, every scientist sits up, as we refer to the eternal philosophical question of what objective reality is and how to recognise it. The author dedicates a short historical excursion to this question and comments on the current approach to the research on reality. Regarding the explored topic, he notes that scientific theories usually take into consideration multiple, often ambivalent factors by means of which they reveal reality phenomena. They do not assess these factors from the point of view of morality. This is not the case with conspiracy theories which clearly divide the world into a “good” one and a “bad” one and only present clear factors, without dealing with the ambivalence of phenomena. I would like to point out the following chapter titled “What is there?” (Was gibt es?, p. 51 ff.), in which the author develops in an excellent manner (admittedly relying on the opinions of other philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell and others) the paradoxes of our perception of the world. He also describes the difficulties of how to understand whether a certain object exists – and this is perhaps even more difficult – of how to find out that a certain object does not exist. He applies the conclusions of the chapter to conspiracy theories by pointing out another of their features. In general, conspiracy theories require us to change our overall system of knowledge. In most cases, their claims do not correspond to the known scientific theories or even to our daily knowledge and experience. Conspiracy theories usually cannot be incorporated into the existing knowledge of reality but require its fundamental transformation. If we accept the conspiracy theory in question, we must often change our previous opinions in order to prevent any contradictions that may arise.

Next, the author analyses reality as “... the sum of what we [...] consider true” (57). Here, philosophy deals with knowledge and doubts. And what do conspiracy theories offer in this respect? They question our existing opinions that we consider to be true and provide us with



new opinions and, specifically, with new certainties. However, as Hepfer argues, conspiracy theories are subject to the same rules as any other ones: we can measure them with the same yardstick on a scale from “probable”, “perhaps appropriate” up to “abstract” and “very improbable”. The text is again accompanied by an interesting philosophical discussion on scepticism and philosophical tools for the exploration of truth.

Hepfer subsequently discusses two structural units which appropriately describe conspiracy theories: frequent use of analogy and analogical conclusions even in those areas of reality where it has been problematic from the beginning. For instance, in the case of people’s actions and behaviour, we can grasp them only with a certain degree of accuracy, either using statistics or psychological, sociological, or anthropological theories. The second structural unit of conspiracy theories is dogma as the basic principle of the entire system (called axiom in science) and, in the case of conspiracy theories, it is a belief in conspiracy and the explanation of events through this lens. Certainly, scientific theories also have axioms, but unlike conspiracy theories, scientific theories do admit axioms, realise that they are models, are aware of their limitations, admit criticism and change of models. This is not possible with conspiracy theories: the fundamental principle – conspiracy – is not discussed, it is something that is given.

The second part of the book focuses on the functions of conspiracy theories. It opens with a chapter titled “Benefit and Motives” (p. 107 ff). To whom and for what purpose do conspiracy theories serve? The brief reply is that they serve anyone who seeks an unequivocal, uncomplicated answer to unclear and complex events and phenomena in the world. Conspiracy theories thereby get close to ideologies or even ideologies of totalitarian regimes which claim the right to the only true and right world view. Just like in the case of ideologies or religious systems, there is someone in the middle also in the case of conspiracy theories – a group of conspirators who are almighty and infallible like God or a leader. The author discusses in greater detail the importance of mass media, in particular the internet, when it comes to very effective and far-reaching dissemination of conspiracy theories, which has largely been supported by the anonymity of the internet, its speed and accessibility anywhere on the globe. Such worldwide coverage has ultimately stabilised the belief in conspiracy theories.

Hepfer subsequently addresses the similarity between myths and conspiracy theories, seeing many common features, such as the fact that both types focus on fundamental situations typical of human societies and human coexistence. Both types designate their respective interpretations of the world as unquestionable and true. Myths often become the basis of identity of large human groups, such as nations, which is not so characteristic of conspiracy theories. However, this does not mean that they cannot have impacts on large social groups. In this context, the author highlights the still topical reflections by political scientist Richard Hofstadter (1965), who identified mass belief in the “dark forces” and conspiracies in the political cultures of certain historical periods. He called this phenomenon a paranoid style in politics with, de facto, conspiracy thinking in the background, that is, insisting on certain opinions and attitudes regardless of the empirical facts. Therefore, conspiracy theories should not be underestimated, since conspiracy thinking forms their essence. Both history and the present have brought many examples of how a paranoid style can, in certain circumstances, lead to mass hostile actions against certain population groups defined in terms of ethnicity, religion, politics, gender, race, etc. In the concluding chapter, Hepfer briefly summarises all aspects of conspiracy theories that he analysed in his book. In addition, he enriched the third edition of his book by a part dealing with the boom of conspiracy theories at the time of the global coronavirus pandemic.

The work by Karl Hepfer is well-arranged and well-structured and has a clear style. I also appreciate the author's dry humour which is present in many of his explanations. Each chapter is followed by an example of a conspiracy theory through which the author discusses his methodological tools of analysis of such narratives. Thus, he does a great job of helping the reader to understand his interpretations, while offering a nice collection of conspiracy theories.

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About the Monkey and Other(ing) Stories

WIESNER, ADAM:

Monkey on My Back. An Autoethnographic Narrative of a Therapeutic Experience

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*“After all, you are just another me and I am just another you.”*

~ Rumi

It is quite difficult to write a review for this book. I could say that it's even impossible, or in fact, even unnecessary. Not because it is not attractive enough, professional enough or empirically supported enough, because it does fulfill all these attributes. But because any further verbal expression will only be another weakened experience and more watered down information. Any evaluation would serve as an act of power. I also don't want any reader to lose the opportunity to experience – understand and feel – this book in their own way. I will therefore try to find a balance between sufficient presentation of content and approaches, while maintaining secrecy and not “revealing” more than necessary. I will rather try a kind of sensitive, humble and concise retelling of this unique story because as the author himself