

Contested Knowledge: Conspiracy Theories and Ockham's Razor  
(Revised for publication)

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I am not sure you should be reading this paper. One writer has called me “a conduit for information from the CIA.” Another says that I am “worse than a Holocaust Denier.” Yet another identifies me as a “Jonestown Apologist” and a “Peoples Temple whitewasher.” But perhaps these credentials make me more qualified than most to write about conspiracy theories.

In the year 2002 I published an article entitled “Reconstructing Reality” in the *Journal of Popular Culture* (36, no. 2, 200-220). In it I described what I called a canon of conspiracy theories about Jonestown. Jonestown was the place where almost a thousand members of a group called Peoples Temple had moved from San Francisco to establish a utopian commune in Guyana, a small country in South America. Following a visit to the community, a California congressman and three reporters were shot and killed by members of the group. Shortly afterwards, more than 900 men, women, and children died in a mass murder-suicide ritual that shocked the world. Because the deaths were so horrifying, and the news stories about them were so contradictory, a number of conspiracy theories arose. Some of these theories argued that Jonestown was a mind control experiment conducted by the CIA. Others claimed that American and British troops killed everyone there. Still others asserted that members of the project were planning to invade the United States to establish a right-wing dictatorship.

What has happened in years since that article came out, however, is what this article discusses. The reaction to that article, and its re-publication on the website *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple* where it can be readily accessed (<http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/Articles/conspiracy.htm>), was completely unexpected. I heard directly from almost all of the writers I mentioned by name. They were outraged at being called conspiracy theorists. They were angry that I had called their version of the truth a conspiracy theory. They felt that I had denigrated them and dismissed their writings, by using the C-Word. Although we have published their reactions online, alongside my original article, they remain angry and dissatisfied (<http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/Articles/hougan.htm> and <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/JonestownReport/Volume11/McCarthyLtr.htm>).

In many respects, they have a right to be angry. The phrase “conspiracy theory” is not neutral. It is value-laden and carries with it condemnation, ridicule, and dismissal. It is a lot like the word “cult,” which we use to describe religions we do not like. We don't call Baptists or Methodists cultists, but we do call Scientologists and Moonies cultists. In a similar fashion, we don't call official reports about the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 or about the John F. Kennedy assassination, conspiracy theories, but we do identify the alternative explanations of those events conspiracy theories.

These areas of contested knowledge raise important questions about history and truth. We have recently seen a number of debates concerning other areas of contested knowledge: global

warming, evolution, sexual orientation. Even the familiar understanding of the American past has come under scrutiny, with revisionists winning the battle of the history books in a number of school districts around the country. In an era of 24-hour cable news and Internet access, ideas and theories that once existed on the margins have gained equal weight and consideration. Yet we know—or at least think we know—that some ideas are better than others, and that some assertions are true and others are false because we have enough credible evidence to make that distinction. In a democratic society, however, with its marketplace of ideas, every idea is available, even anti-democratic ones. Thus it becomes imperative to see if we can find a way to address issues of contested knowledge, on the one hand, and common values and assumptions on the other.

I'd like to address two related topics in this paper. First, I will provide a brief definition of conspiracy and conspiracy theories. Second, I will consider the problem of "stigmatized knowledge," before concluding with a discussion of history and truth.

### Toward a Definition

Before going further, I think it's best to define the term conspiracy and conspiracy theory. The American Heritage Dictionary offers the following: "A theory seeking to explain a disputed case or matter as a plot by a secret group or alliance rather than an individual or isolated act." Kathryn Olmsted provides a similarly measured description when she writes that, "A conspiracy occurs when two or more people collude to abuse power or break the law. A *conspiracy theory* is a proposal about a conspiracy that may or may not be true; it has not yet been proven" (*Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy*, Oxford, 2009). Dr. Olmsted's point about abusing power or breaking the law is important to reiterate: people are rarely accused of conspiring to give food baskets to the poor. Secrecy, therefore, is a necessary component of the conspiracy because the actions are unethical or criminal and must be hidden.

A conspiracy theory purports to present unknown facts in evidence. These facts have generally been suppressed, however. David Ray Griffin, a widely-respected scholar in religious studies, and a founder of the 9/11 Truth Movement, attempts to de-stigmatize the term "conspiracy theory" by differentiating between generic, rational, and irrational conspiracy theories. If individuals conspire to rob a bank or to conceal the health risks of smoking, then it is legitimate to call those conspiracies, and our ideas about them, conspiracy theories. There is nothing irrational about holding such a conspiracy theory. According to Griffin, all Americans agree that there was a conspiracy to perpetrate the 9/11 attacks: "People differ only about the identity of the conspirators" he says.

I would say that in everyday usage, a conspiracy theory refers to a hypothesis that challenges what is accepted as common knowledge. It disputes the conventional wisdom and the governing narratives of history and culture. I do not think Griffin will succeed in his attempt to neutralize the negative stigma of being called a conspiracist. But in a sense, he is already aware of that. By calling the conspiracy theories concerning the terrorist attacks the "9/11 Truth Movement," the problematic language of conspiracism is abolished, at least momentarily.

Why do conspiracy theories emerge? Simply claiming that marginalized people hold marginalized views is insufficient. Why have conspiracy theories arisen about the John Kennedy assassination, but not about the John Lennon assassination? [Since giving this talk I have learned that there are indeed conspiracy theories about John Lennon's death.] Certain events and certain

types of people lend themselves to conspiracy thinking. For example, plane crashes occur with relative frequency. The National Transportation and Safety Board reports an average of 36 incidents per year in the U.S. But when Paul Wellstone, a popular Democratic senator from Minnesota and a likely challenger to George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential race, dies in a plane crash, that's a conspiracy.

### Stigmatized Knowledge

In his book titled *A Culture of Conspiracy* (University of California, 2003), Michael Barkun picks up where Richard Hofstadter left off. Hofstadter wrote an essay for Harper's Magazine in 1964 called "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." In it he described the mindset which frames all political events as a struggle between good and evil. Hofstadter wrote that, "The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values." Writing almost forty years later, Barkun analyzes the sources for a contemporary apocalypticism that is grounded in a "culture of conspiracy." He identifies three types of knowledge that help us understand this. He first uses James Webb's concept of "rejected knowledge," which Webb introduced to discuss the history of European occultism. This type of knowledge would include recognizing the significance of crystals, magic, energy fields, numerology, and anything typically called the pseudo-sciences. Barkun then considers Colin Campbell's idea of the "cultic milieu." This is the supportive social and ideological environment from which a number of unusual or offbeat ideas arise. Beliefs in karma or reincarnation, as well as beliefs in the coming New Age, or anything else that the dominant culture considers deviant, thrive in this milieu.

Barkun combines Webb and Campbell's ideas of rejected knowledge and cultic milieu to come up with what he calls "stigmatized knowledge." He states that such knowledge comprises:

claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalization of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error—universities, communities of scientific researchers, and the like.

Barkun describes five types of knowledge that the academic community has stigmatized. First, forgotten knowledge (like the existence of the lost continent of Atlantis or the little Lemurians who live in the center of the earth); Second, superseded knowledge (like astrology or alchemy); Third, ignored knowledge (like folk medicine and home remedies); Fourth, rejected knowledge (like UFO abductions); and fifth, suppressed knowledge (like the fact the U.S. government introduced AIDS into the Black community, or that it was party to the 9/11 attacks).

This last type of stigmatized knowledge—namely suppressed knowledge—forms the basis of current conspiracy theories because of the conviction that powerful individuals are limiting or controlling the free flow of information for nefarious purposes. As Barkun says, "stigmatization itself is taken to be evidence of truth—for why else would a belief be stigmatized if not to suppress the truth?" Those holding stigmatized views disdain the conclusions decided by professional knowledge-holders. They have a love-hate relationship with gatekeepers—that would be those of us who work for educational institutions. We have denied them access to the media, to the public, and to the world by demanding a particular type and level proof.

Despite their failure to live up to normal requirements of scholarship, the conspiracists nonetheless want to appear credible to us. They know that research counts for something, and as a result, their papers and articles are heavily footnoted. They appear to take nothing on faith, but

meticulously document every claim. They attempt to cite credible sources whom no one could charge with bias or ulterior motive. They may even use government documents in order to make their case against government conspirators.

David Griffin notes the importance of peer review to the scientific method. “To be accepted as good science,” he writes, “an explanation must be able to pass muster with fellow scientists having no vested interest in the outcome.” He then claims that official reports about 9/11 have not been subject to autonomous review within the government, and that the opinions of independent scientists who have offered countervailing opinions are ignored or dismissed as the “ravings of ‘conspiracy theorists.’” Clearly the quantity of footnotes and citations is not at issue, but rather the quality of the evidence being presented. Who gets to make decisions about quality and truth?

### History and Truth

The state of Washington adopted a new history textbook a few years ago, which explicitly stated that the internment of Japanese Americans during World War Two was wrong. There was debate at the time the textbook was adopted. Some believed that the existence of Japanese spies made it necessary to remove potential enemies from vulnerable areas, and thus relocation was justified. Although the Japanese as well as their non-Japanese supporters argued against internment on moral and constitutional grounds, they lost those arguments in the short run. In the long run, however, our society came to a different verdict. In 1988 President Reagan signed a bill awarding reparations to the Japanese. The first payments were made in 1990. The distance of time allowed for a review of particular actions, and let the nation conclude it had made a terrible mistake. Yet we do not want to wait for 20-20 hindsight in order to make moral judgments today.

Contemporary postmodern and critical theory have paradoxically both undermined and contributed to our ability to reject conspiracism. In a postmodernist world, a conspiracy theory seems to have as much credibility as a well-established historical fact. At the same time, it does not necessarily have any additional credibility. Postmodern theory challenges us to consider many narratives, not just a single, dominant one. I believe this is basically a good thing. Navigators at sea use a process of triangulation to determine their location. In other words, they look at multiple points to determine where they are exactly. If they miscalculate the points, they get lost. This is a useful analogy for considering both historical and current events. With multiple perspectives we may be able to determine what an elephant actually looks like, rather than feeling about blindly for its parts.

An example of the importance of including different perspectives is occurring in Israel and Palestine today. Palestinian and Israeli educators have developed a textbook called *Learning Each Other's Historical Narrative*, which addresses the irreconcilable versions of “official” history. This experimental book places events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict side-by-side on every page so that students can read and understand each others’ stories of “what happened.” By exposing conflicting accounts of history, the writers hope to overcome the polarized attitudes Palestinian and Israeli young people have about themselves and their neighbors.

I think that placing conspiracy theories side by side with accepted narratives is preferable to keeping them suppressed or stigmatized. Both Brad Meltzer’s “Decoded” and another series on the History Channel, “Ancient Aliens,” presuppose that history is comprised of secrets, codes, and mysteries that we are only today able to uncover. Yet is this really the case? Shouldn’t we

ask why is it clear that the pyramids in Egypt were not built by space aliens? We have a large archeological record that indicates natural mummification preceded artificial mummification, and that reveals multiple false starts and attempts to build various pyramids before the Egyptians succeeded in literally building stepping-stones to the great pyramid of Giza. But, we might say, the aliens planted that false evidence to deceive us deliberately.

Before we end up going in circles completely we might invoke Ockham's Razor. This is the 14th-century maxim which states, the simplest explanation is best. In Latin, "Pluralitas non est ponenda sine neccesitate" or: entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily. A good example of Ockham's Razor that appeared online compares the following two statements:

The planets move around the sun in ellipses because there is a force between any of them and the sun which decreases as the square of the distance.

The planets move around the sun in ellipses because there is a force between any of them and the sun which decreases as the square of the distance. This force is generated by the will of some powerful aliens ([http://physics.ucr.edu/~wudka/Physics7/Notes\\_www/node10.html](http://physics.ucr.edu/~wudka/Physics7/Notes_www/node10.html)).

In the first instance, no extraneous force is posited. In the second instance, we have introduced some powerful aliens. But the aliens aren't really needed to explain the physics of gravity. In the same way, we don't really need aliens to construct the pyramids, and their introduction just raises more questions. Like, if they were smart enough to fly to planet earth, couldn't they have done a better job building the pyramids?

Despite these questions, it seems clear that we want to be titillated by conspiracy thinking. I am actually glad to see Jesse Ventura's new television series "Conspiracy Theory." The former Minnesota governor's reality program is a bit like "Ripley's Believe It Or Not" for the twenty-first century.

Jesse Ventura and his team of investigators are on a mission to examine some of the most frightening and mysterious conspiracy allegations of our time. They review evidence and meet with experts and eyewitnesses to learn more about such topics as the JFK assassination, Area 51 and a possible plot to kidnap our nation's water supply.

The fact that the show is running on the Tru-TV network is also encouraging. If you have to call something "true," then it probably isn't, in the same way that "fair and balanced" are neither. The 9/11 "Truth Movement" is yet another example of the word "truth" suggesting its opposite. When President Richard Nixon introduced "Operation Candor" to the nation in the 1970s, most Americans assumed there would simply be more lies to cover up the Watergate conspiracy. Stephen Colbert's concept of "truthiness" has nothing whatsoever to do with truth. I do not think we should underestimate the power of mockery.

Nevertheless, in my opinion it is important to call conspiracy theories by some other more neutral, less derogatory term. I do not think that it would legitimize the theories, but rather, would expose them to examination. I don't think Michael Barkun's "stigmatized knowledge" will ever become a household word. David Griffin's "alternative theories" might be useful, especially among those advancing the alternative theories. I have proposed "contested knowledge" in the title of this talk, as a way to indicate that a number of official accounts of history are not necessarily accepted by all citizens. For example, we can look at attempts to canonize Father Junipero Serra. Accounts of his life and work are conflicting, and the judgment of history—whether or not he deserves to be considered a saint—is still being created. His saintliness, however, is contested by Native Americans. There is no conspiracy involved, but

there are different evaluations of historical evidence that give rise to the debate.

I do not want to give equal weight to conspiracy theories in our reflections on history. At the same time, I do not want to see them flourish in the shadows, only to explode, as they did in the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. The Southern Poverty Law Center uncovers conspiracies against racial and religious minorities all the time. These actual conspiracies need to be brought to light, just as more wide-ranging conspiracy theories and theorists must be exposed, rather than hidden. Holocaust Denial, for example, is one conspiracy theory that must be challenged wherever it arises. This is the idea that the Holocaust in which six million Jews died, as well as millions of other people, never occurred. Although the Nazis themselves utilized euphemisms—like the Final Solution—to mask their extermination plans, Holocaust Denial as a movement did not arise until the late 1970s, and took root in the United States and the United Kingdom. The verdict in the libel case of *Irving v. Lipstadt* was a victory for truth in history. In that instance, Holocaust Denial went on trial, and those who believe in a Jewish conspiracy and other anti-semitic projects lost not just in the court of public opinion but in a British court of law.

It seems important to note the existence of conspiracy theories, both to observe them and to disarm them, as well as to challenge them whenever possible. When we teach about the John Kennedy assassination, it is essential to note the historical fact that a large body of conspiracy theories has arisen around that event. The truth or falsity of the theories is one issue, but the fact that 81% of Americans believe that Lee Harvey Oswald conspired with others to kill the president is also significant and worth examining. That 81% do not agree on who Oswald's co-conspirators were, but they do agree that he did not act alone. Thus, teaching about the theories, is not the same as teaching the theories, in the same way that teaching about religious beliefs is not the same as teaching people what to believe.

Our knowledge in the present is always limited and provisional. Frequently it is only far into the future that we learn the whole story. A friend of ours has said that when she dies she has two questions to ask St. Peter: first, who killed President Kennedy; and second, what happened in Jonestown, Guyana.

Yet we must act in the present with the knowledge that we have. If conspiracy theories simply make us fearful, xenophobic, and angry, they serve a malevolent purpose. But if conspiracy theories make us scrutinize government, business, military, or other institutions more closely, then they serve a useful purpose. They might make people and organizations more accountable. And that's a good thing. Our knowledge should always be contested if we hope to approach the truth.