

# Conspiracy Theory and Pragmatic Inquiry: Is There a Role for Education?

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## Introduction

Raised as a Southern Baptist in the deep South's Bible Belt, religion has been an integral part of my life experience. Recently, I came across a Southern Baptist news source that voiced concern by some pastors and leaders about the number of their flock who adhere to conspiracy theories. At first, it amazed me how people I know and grew up with could hold such positions but after a bit of contemplation I realized that maybe I should not be so surprised. My religious education was filled with the struggle of good vs. evil, light vs. darkness, and cautioned that one must be ever vigilant that Satan or the great deceiver is lurking behind every corner in an attempt to trap one into sin. Drawing on a warrior metaphor, we are told by the apostle Paul to put on our armor and be the ever-mindful watchman. Some have referred to this as a form of spiritual warfare, a warfare that will continue until the apocalypse and the return of Christ to triumph over evil. In a recent article in *Christianity Today*, a survey conducted by the conservative American Enterprise Institute showed that 27% of white evangelicals believe the QAnon conspiracy theory is "completely or mostly accurate."<sup>1</sup> This includes the belief that former President Trump was "secretly battling a cabal of pedophile Democrats, that that election was stolen, and that antifa was responsible for the insurrections on January 6, 2021 at the United States Capitol."<sup>2</sup> While the antifa claim was supported by Rudy Giuliani and Franklin Graham, the FBI has claimed there is no credible evidence antifa played a role in the insurrection. Furthermore, the survey reports evangelicals are very socially and media-connected as well as politically attuned and motivated. Since they tend to rely on certain news sources (such as *The Epoch Times*, Fox News, Newsmax), they live in a type of "social echo chamber" that reinforces their values and beliefs, which largely go unchallenged. I wish to make clear that this "social echo chamber" is not just a feature of the political right, but also affects the left as they tend to follow MSNBC, CNN, *Democracy Now*, NPR, etc. These echo chambers are created by social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, google, Pinterest, YouTube, etc., and their use of sorting algorithms which prioritize what each viewer sees based on that user's previous searches or

queries. Put simply, the content we are allowed to see is based on analysis of our behavior and social media sites weed out material thought not to be of interest to us. We see not only the marketing of products but also the marketing of ideas, a focus of this paper.

In a recent study on conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries, researchers found that conspiracy mentality was strongest among those who felt politically disenfranchised, both on the left and the right.<sup>3</sup> In “American Politics in Two Dimensions,” published in *The American Journal of Political Science*, researchers argue that conspiracy theories do not align clearly with the political left or right. They also note that conspiracy theorists, left and right, feel disillusioned, suspicious of authority, and politically ineffective. These researchers contend that Donald Trump did not invent conspiracy theory but certainly made good use of those theories which he utilized to strengthen his political base. Trump’s provocative pronouncements related to such topics as covid-19, the World Health Organization, immigration, NATO, etc., gave credence to multiple right-wing conspiracy theories that still dominate the current narrative.<sup>4</sup> So the mantra of both the left and right often becomes, “If our elected leaders will not protect the country, we must do it ourselves.” In this paper I attempt briefly to explore the history of conspiracy theory, the characteristics of conspiracy theory, how it can present a challenge to science and inquiry, and finally through the lens of critical pragmatism offer some hope—or perhaps faith—that education through nurturing critical inquiry, as it should in a democracy, can help stem the tide of many dangerous conspiracy theories and those which might in fact be warranted.

### **The Nature of Conspiracy Theory**

Conspiracy theories are considered by some scholars to be “erroneous beliefs that people use to explain malevolent and or unlawful acts that are perceived to be directed by and in favor of a small and powerful group that works in secret against a larger group of unwitting victims.”<sup>5</sup> Matthew Dentith, in his book *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, lists three traits of a conspiracy theory. First, there exists or existed some set of agents with a plan; second, steps have been taken by the agents to minimize public awareness of what they are up to; and, thirdly, some end is or was desired by these agents.<sup>6</sup> “The most important and ubiquitous characteristic of the conspirators,” writes Jovan Byford, “is their elite status: the villains of any conspiracy theory are typically found in universities or within the higher echelons of business and politics.”<sup>7</sup> These villains sit in positions of privilege, control the press, media, education, and government, etc., that allow these groups to control information and thus indoctrinate the masses. Conspiracy theories often occur in time of confusion, anxiety, or uncertainty, such as in times of war, economic upheaval, natural disaster, and disease. Modern examples include the origins of the New Deal, World War II and its causes, the AIDS epidemic, the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks,

the Kennedy assassination, the Iraq war, ebola, climate change, the 2020 U.S. presidential election, and, most recently, covid-19 origins, as well as replacement theory. Taking the New Deal as a historical example, some conspirators characterized the New Deal as “the Jew deal” due to some of FDR’s advisors being Jewish, including Felix Frankfurter, Bernard Baruch, Louis Brandeis, and Henry Morgenthau. Some conspiracists of the era saw the blue eagle symbol of the National Recovery Administration as resembling the beast of Revelation.<sup>8</sup>

While conspiracies historically have always been part of human existence, the more modern concept of conspiracy is dated by some scholars to be a product of the Enlightenment or reactions to it. In 1779, French savant and Jesuit priest Augustin Barruel published *Memoirs: Illustrating the History of Jacobism*, and Englishman John Robison published *Proofs of a Conspiracy: Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies*.<sup>9</sup> Adam Weishaupt, the founder of the Illuminati was the chief target of the attacks. Weishaupt was a Bavarian academic at the University of Ingolstadt and, in 1776, formed a society that challenged the traditional doctrines of the church, advocating for the perfectibility of mankind, and stressing natural religion. In sympathy with Weishaupt’s more Enlightenment view of Jesus, Thomas Jefferson explains,

[Jesus’] intention was simply to reinstate natural religion, and by diffusing the light of his morality, to teach us to govern ourselves. His precepts are the love of god and love of our neighbor. And by teaching innocence of conduct, he expected to place men in their natural state of liberty and equality.<sup>10</sup>

Both Barruel and Robison contend the French Revolution was a conspiracy challenging tradition and religion, leading to the eventual destruction of Christianity. As an anti-Enlightenment and anti-philosophe, Barruel wrote in London where he attacked Jacobism, linked the Freemasons to the Knights Templar, and portrayed Jews as instrumental in the French Revolution. Robison was a chemist and professor of natural philosophy at the University of Edinburgh and fought against Enlightenment views of chemistry, attacking Antoine Lavoisier and Joseph Priestly, even suggesting that Madame Lavoisier was an occult priestess.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Jefferson had read parts of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of Augustin Barruel’s book and referred to the book as “perfectly the ravings of a Bedlamite.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the most infamous conspiracy documents is the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which first appeared in 1905, written anonymously, although some scholars suggest it originated with the Russian secret police under Tsar Nicholas II, who praised the work. The *Protocols* are written in first person and attempt to document a meeting by Jews to achieve world domination. In the 1930s a highly publicized trial held in Berne, Switzerland,

proved the *Protocols* to be a forgery, but that did not seem to undermine the book's cult status with millions of readers around the world.<sup>13</sup> The *Protocols* became popular in the U.S., Britain, and Germany. Sixteen years following the publication of the *Protocols*, British socialite Nesta Webster published another conspiracy, *World Revolution: The Plot Against Civilization*. Familiar with Barruel, Robison, and the *Protocols*, Webster sought to connect the French and Russian Revolutions to the work of Jews, claiming the Jews were the dominant force in the Illuminati. As scholars critiqued the work, Winston Churchill believed the *Protocols* truly exposed the conspiracy of Jews during the French Revolution.<sup>14</sup> Replicating its historical roots, anti-Semitism often appears as a main characteristic of modern conspiracy theory, the general belief that Jews had or have considerable world power and wealth and control or seek to control democratic governments and financial institutions. Jovan Byford, in his book *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*, writes, "These conspiracies represent an omnipotent force with almost supernatural power, intent on the destruction of independent nations and the creation of a secular, Jewish controlled, New World Order."<sup>15</sup> Anti-Semitism is characteristic of QAnon beliefs which seems paradoxical in that politically these same forces support the state of Israel over Palestinian sovereignty.

Conspiracy theories often use religious imagery or motifs as they seek to point to the world's evil and may do so using sexual innuendo, as is evident today. These theories may point out the rituals of the ancient Canaanites, Babylonians, etc., and may address child sacrifice, orgies, child molestation, etc. and point to how they, the conspiracists, hold their position based on moral authority or higher moral ground. This kind of imagery is consistent with QAnon conspiracy theories. QAnon is best known for its support of the conspiracy theory that the Democratic Party, Hollywood celebrities, and billionaires with Democratic Party sympathies have been and are engaging in pedophilia and human trafficking. These theories need to be taken seriously and can sometimes result in violent acts. One conspiracy theory, known as Pizzagate, holds that a secret, Satanic pedophile ring linked to the Democratic Party was meeting in Washington, D.C. at a pizzeria named Comet Ping Pong. A 28-year-old conspiracist from North Carolina claiming the moral high ground attempted to investigate the claims and in doing so fired several shots into the pizzeria. He told arresting officers that he had read online that the pizzeria was harboring child sex slaves. Another conspiracy, commonly known as replacement theory, is based on the idea that the Democratic Party is trying to increase immigration to the point that Democrats will dominate the electorate and thus replace "white America" and its values. The recent shooting in Buffalo, New York was initiated by an individual who proclaimed himself a white supremacist and who sought specifically to attack a grocery store frequented by African-American shoppers.<sup>16</sup>

Former President Donald Trump has been perceived as a charismatic leader who fought a secret battle challenging the deep-state's secretive cabal.<sup>17</sup> Daniel Bell, in *The End of Ideology* (1962), writes “the tendency to convert concrete issues into ideological problems, to invest them with moral color and high emotional charge, is to invite conflicts which can only damage a society.”<sup>18</sup> Bell stresses these conspiracy theories give a sense of comfort to the believer which may be responsible for making these theories so popular while, simultaneously leading individuals away from tackling serious issues.

### **Conspiracy and Scientific Inquiry: A Problem Beyond Covid-19**

Karl Popper, in his *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (1963), notes that when conspiracy theorists gain political power, they tend to govern through the use of conspiracy theory. Conspiracists, Popper implies, tend to be suspicious of most authority including official sources of knowledge. As seen with covid-19, conspiracists may stand in opposition to science, public health measures, and government officials. In a most prophetic sense Popper argues, “This suspicion of scientific and medical knowledge translates into regrettable lifestyle choices with serious implications for public health...and sometimes lethal consequences.”<sup>19</sup> Some scholars suggest conspiracy theories help us overcome feelings of powerlessness and alienation, which seems clearly evident in the case of covid-19 and the climate crisis.<sup>20</sup> When people feel powerless and alienated, this situation can often result in the emergence of a charismatic leader who makes the claim that together they can fight against the forces of evil or manipulation, and that leader may claim moral superiority.

In discussing science deniers, psychologists Sara and Jack Gorman, in their book *Denying to the Grave*, “suggest based on human cognitive function that calling science deniers irrational may not be the best way to understand their behavior, and by belittling them is the surest way to reinforcing an anti-science position.”<sup>21</sup> Human beings tend to seek certainty, the why of the uncertainly or what we cannot explain. We all know that scientists, doctors, or public health officials are not the best in alleviating this uncertainly because they may lack the ability or choose not to explain things clearly and of interest. As practicing scientists, the Gormans suggest that “scientists seem to waiver between overly complicated explanations that only they can fathom and overly simplistic explanations that feel patronizing and convey minimal useful information.”<sup>22</sup> This seems to be evident during the covid-19 press conferences held during the Trump administration which exacerbated misunderstanding and confusion. For many, the medical officials appeared arrogant, implying they know what is best for the public and insisting the public not question them. What I wish to emphasize in this paper and what officials often fail to do is to help the public understand how science works, to understand that inquiry is a process and not final, nor is it a search

for absolutes. Part of the problem is that scientists, including those just mentioned, often speak in absolutes but, in all honesty, know they can never be 100% sure. When they change their recommendations, as evident during the covid-19 pandemic, the public may see this as a lie, as the authorities lacking sufficient understanding, or as authorities trying to manipulate public opinion in some way. If one has low self-esteem, feels powerless, anxious, and does not trust authority, these kinds of explanations send a secreted message. Again, this is an issue for both the U.S. political right and left. There is some evidence that suggests that when we experience an emotional or stressful state our memory stores it in a way that resurfaces when that exact or a similar emotional state reoccurs.<sup>23</sup>

Skepticism about science seems to permeate conspiracy culture and while some conspirators on the left might suggest that science is in the pocket of big Pharma and the military industrial complex, the right has challenged medical authorities in international organizations such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations. Scientific skepticism can be based on a lack of understanding about how science works, its method of inquiry, but it can also result from how science can be manipulated by authorities to serve their own interests.

### **The Role of Education**

There appears no doubt that the U.S. public, politicians, and the media need better to understand scientific inquiry and as educators we have an obligation to enhance that understanding. I believe engaging critical pragmatism can serve as a tool to challenge and effectively deal with certain conspiracy theories, left and right. In *A Quest for Certainty*, John Dewey writes, "Perfect certainly is what man wants. It cannot be found by practical doing or making; these take effect in an uncertain future, and involve peril, the risk of misadventure, frustration and failure."<sup>24</sup> Clearly, scientific inquiry is risky, and may not lead to a clear explanation or outcome. Dewey challenges the "quest for certainty" and this forms the basis of his view of scientific inquiry as a metaphor for democracy: a tool by which we openly communicate and share information to solve basic problems of human existence. It is not so much the information science gives us, although that is important, it is how science ideally goes about discovering that information. Dewey argues for a form of inquiry or experimental intelligence patterned after science that "liberates man from the bondage of the past, due to ignorance and accident hardened into custom."<sup>25</sup> This intelligence, which for the pragmatist integrates knowledge and action, is formed through testing ideas through practical life experience. "Intelligence is not something possessed once for all," Dewey notes, "it is in constant process of forming and its retention requires constant alertness in observing consequences, an open-minded will to earn and courage in re-adjustment."<sup>26</sup> What we lack on the left and the right is an open-mindedness and a willingness to listen

to others and that is exacerbated by how we use social media outlets—or perhaps how social media uses us. Open-mindedness and the courage to readjust our opinions based on new information is lacking in contemporary society and another reason for the need to teach children inquiry through discovery, curiosity, and imagination. Dewey would be concerned about the intellectual divide which has resulted in political division in which life experience is often denigrated by an educational elite.

Dewey challenges those who believe a scientific attitude of mind, a mind of inquiry, curiosity, and imagination are not relevant in teaching children or that children are unable to comprehend basic science. He argues in *How We Think* that childhood is “marked by ardent curiosity, fertile imagination and love of experimental inquiry, is near, very near, to the scientific attitude of mind.”<sup>27</sup> He links imagination and curiosity to this scientific attitude of mind (inquiry), in his view the democratic way of thinking. George Herbert Mead argues that good science welcomes all interested inquirers to deliberation, “a society that hoped to deploy scientific inquiry on behalf of its purpose would have to do the same, it would, on epistemic grounds, have to be widely inclusive.”<sup>28</sup> So in essence, “different perspectives, sensibilities, and experiences must be taken seriously.”<sup>29</sup> However, as Thomas Kuhn warns us, science may suppress novelties because they fall outside its paradigm.<sup>30</sup> The suppression of different perspectives (such as varying religious beliefs) and sensibilities is a threat to open dialogue and democracy itself. The left and the right can fall prey to this suppression and which endangers free speech.

How can we help students better recognize conspiracy theories that are irrational and, yes, those that are indeed rational? For this to occur we must fight against those who fear the discussion of controversial topics in the classroom. There must be room for open debate and discussion in classrooms. The purpose of school according to Dewey was to nurture “children in cooperative and mutually helpful living,” in essence a democratic community, but to accomplish this education has to focus more on inquiring than on acquiring.<sup>31</sup> Last spring, I taught a group of students in the final year of their master’s program to become teachers. Mostly elementary, they were very concerned about the lack of science instruction in the professional development schools they work in. In my state, West Virginia, the lack of science teaching is due to a heavy stress on math and literacy which, although important, is tied to the neo-liberal focus of educational reform. Neo-liberalism “tends to treat all creative agency and potential rationally as properties of individuals rather than of groups, which are in turn understood only as fetters on the freedom and mobility of individuals.”<sup>32</sup> Neo-liberalism fosters the notion of the competitive and isolated individual. This isolated individual may seek solace in a group that gives them an identity and that supports their values



and beliefs. This worldview can set the stage for adherence to conspiracy theory on the political left and right. While it may not seem a matter of immediacy to teach children science, I argue that it is based upon the lack of understanding people have about science and where better to start than when children are curious, creative, and imaginative and trying better to understand their world. However, it is not scientific knowledge alone that is significant, although scientific knowledge can be important (such as why we wash our hands during a pandemic), it is the method of inquiry that is most significant. Our current approach in science education does not give young children a sense of how scientific inquiry works, or how to understand what constitutes scientific evidence or information we can trust, at least for the time being. There is plenty of evidence that suggests that hands-on science for young children enhances their enjoyment of science but also enhances proficiency with science concepts.<sup>33</sup> However, I wish clearly to express it is not science, but its method of testing and sorting through information, with that information possibly changing, or being fallible, based on further inquiry. Dewey stresses that acquiring is always secondary to inquiry and that the teacher and the student both need to be involved in active inquiry. Of course, inquiry is not just about scientific understanding, but a social activity necessary for learning how to sort through what is viable, trustworthy information and what is not. For Dewey this kind of inquiry is a social and cooperative activity and ideally where the individual begins to see the self “from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs.”<sup>34</sup> This is education as social and moral, in essence an ethical association, a democratic community of sorts. This type of education is emphasized by Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett in their work *Dewey’s Dream* which stresses civil society, public schools, and democratic citizenship. They emphasize,

Human beings best develop their innate capacity for intelligence thought and action when they purposefully use it as a powerful instrument to help them solve the multitude of perplexing problems that continually confront them in their daily lives—and when they reflect on their experience and thereby increase their capacity for future intelligence thought and action.<sup>35</sup>

And when one has faith in other human beings to use this knowledge for the benefit of the common good. This is faith in the power of “pooled and cooperative intelligence.”<sup>36</sup> Robert Westbrook contends that Dewey’s cooperative or associated thought is in opposition to privatized expert knowledge, which at times can contest science—certainly medical science and its ties to profit motive. He writes, “Dewey’s call for scientific intelligence was not a call for the rule of intelligent scientists but for egalitarian distribution of the capacity for scientific thinking and its incorporation into democratic decision making in the polity, workforce, and elsewhere.”<sup>37</sup>



Critical pragmatism offers a means to critique the arrogance of science but also those who outright dismiss it.

### Conclusion

Alison Kadlec in her book *Dewey's Critical Pragmatism*, argues for a social intelligence “based upon our willingness and ability to communicate flexibly with people from widely different backgrounds who have different, even profoundly so viewpoints.”<sup>38</sup> This takes us back to Mead’s<sup>39</sup> position on the need for open deliberation sensitive to differences of opinion and sensibilities. The willingness and desire to communicate or deliberate with others is a choice and too many refuse to make that choice or refuse to cross the boundaries of their social media feed. Democracy is faith in the potential of human beings and necessary for democracy and is a responsibility that must be cultivated. For the pragmatist, this is the cultivation of habits, or incorporated experiences, that push us to examine our own beliefs and assumptions and those of others. This is the purpose of a democratic education.

While new forms of communication, enhanced by technology, offer potential for meaningful deliberations, they can also serve to foster misinformation, mean-spiritedness, and, of course, conspiracy theories on the left and right. Growing political polarization makes meaningful deliberation more difficult or even impossible if people are not willing to reach beyond their sphere of influence. Kadlec notes,

While there are promising signs of social intelligence emerging in new creative uses of the internet, opportunities for meaningful deliberation are as, if not more, circumscribed than they have ever been before. This is due in large part to the evermore sophisticated channels through which polarization of public discourse and privatization of decision-making processes is occurring.<sup>40</sup>

These circumstances clearly are leading to a feeling of disconnectedness from the decision-making process and a general distrust of authority.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, this disconnectedness appears characteristic of both the left and right, leading to more polarization.

There is no simple solution in dealing with conspiracy theories and I have no idea how to handle those who refuse to acknowledge what appears valid and factual information and who often rely on “warped explanatory logic that is not amenable to rational debate.”<sup>42</sup> However, I do believe that educators do have an obligation to nurture young children in the spirit of inquiry, even something as simple as teaching them science in elementary school. This instruction needs to be linked to a type of civic education that explores the nature of inquiry in an integrated approach to subject matter, including the arts and humanities, in terms of how human beings experience and go about solving the basic problems of human existence.

Democracy is greatly threatened and cannot exist in an environment of mistrust and misinformation and a refusal to communicate beyond one's limited social sphere. Our ideological bubbles must be penetrated, where we are exposed to a wider variety of information and not just reinforcing our own point of view. However, we must be willing to penetrate the bubble, to challenge our own beliefs and values, a risky endeavor, yet when we make clear truth claims there is no reason to engage in this kind of open discourse. It is this failure to communicate that Dewey feared most and why he favored warranted assertability over absolute truth. In a spiritual sense, Dewey argues,

...the foundation of democracy is faith in the capacities of human nature; faith in human influence, and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience. It is not the belief that these things are complete but that if given a show they will grow and be able to generate progressively the knowledge and wisdom needed to guide collective action.<sup>43</sup>

And thereby building, in essence, a community of inquirers.

### Endnotes

- 1 Jack Jenkins, "QAnon Conspiracies Sway Faith Groups Including 1 in 4 Evangelicals," *Christianity Today* (News and Reporting, February 11, 2021, 1–3, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/february/white-evangelicals-qanon-election-conspiracy-trump-aci.html>)
- 2 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 3 Rolland Imhoff, Felix Zimmer, Olivier Klein, João H. C. António, Maria Babinska, Adrian Bangerter, Michal Bilewicz, Nebojša Blanuša, Kosta Bovan, Rumena Bužarovska, Aleksandra Cichočka, Sylvain Delouvé, Karen M. Douglas, Asbjørn Dyrendal, Tom Etienne, Biljana Gjoneska, Sylvie Graf, Estrella Gualda, Gilad Hirschberger, Anna Kende, Yordan Kutiyski, Peter Krekó, Andre Krouwel, Silvia Mari, Jasna Milošević Đorđević, Maria Serena Panasiti, Myrto Pantazi, Ljupcho Petkovski, Giuseppina Porciello, André Rabelo, Raluca Nicoleta Radu, Florin A. Sava, Michael Schepisi, Robbie M. Sutton, Viren Swami, Hulda Thórisdóttir, Vladimir Turjačanin, Pascal Wagner-Egger, Iris Zeželj, and Jan-Willem van Prooijen, "Conspiracy Mentality and Political Orientation Across 26 Countries," *Nature Human Behavior* 6 (2022): 392–403, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-021-01258-7>

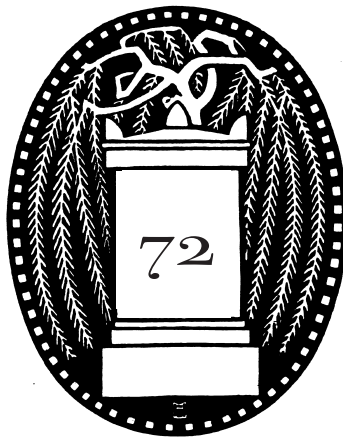
- 4 Joseph E. Uscinski, Adam M. Enders, Michelle I Seelig, Casey A. Klofstad, John R. Funchion, Caleb Everett, Stefan Wuchty, Kamal Premaratne, and Manohar N. Murthi, "American Politics in Two Dimensions: Partisan and Ideological Identities versus Anti-Establishment Orientations," *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 4 (2021): 877–895.
- 5 Scott Reid, "Conspiracy Theories," in *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009).
- 6 Matthew Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- 7 Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 76.
- 8 Thomas Milan Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracists: How Delusions Have Overrun America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 77.
- 9 See Augustin Barruel, *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobism* (London: French Press, 1797), and John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (London: William Creech, 1797).
- 10 Thomas Jefferson to Bishop James Madison, January 31, 1800, National Archives, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-31-02-0297>
- 11 Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracists*, 16–17. Lyman Beecher, the father of Catherine Beecher and Harriett Beecher Stowe, believed that Catholic immigration in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was stimulated by the Vatican to undermine the American republic. He reasoned, why then should they be allowed to vote when they will only follow the dictates of the Pope?
- 12 Jefferson to Bishop James Madison, January 31, 1800.
- 13 Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 55. George Soros is often discussed in this light as a controller of the global economy and politics.
- 14 See The Rt. Hon. Winston S. Churchill, "Zionism versus Bolshevism: The Struggle for the Soul of the Jewish People," *Illustrated Sunday Herald*, February 8, 1920, 5, <https://archive.org/details/ZionismVsBolshevismByWinstonChurchill>
- 15 Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 95.
- 16 Mark Berman and Meryl Kornfield, "Buffalo Shooting Suspect Charged with Murder as a Hate Crime, Domestic Terrorism," *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2022, 1. See also Connor Perrett and Kieran Press-Reynolds, "The Racist 'Replacement Theory' Tied to the Buffalo Shootings Has Increasingly Become a Right-Wing Rallying

- Call,” *Business Insider*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.nl/the-racist-replacement-theory-tied-to-the-buffalo-shootings-has-increasingly-become-a-right-wing-media-rallying-call/>
- <sup>17</sup> See Julia Carrie Wong, “QAnon Explained: The Anti-Semitism Conspiracy Gaining Traction Around the World,” *The Guardian*, August 25, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/25/qanon-conspiracy-theory-explained-trump-what-is>
- <sup>18</sup> See Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1962), 121; and Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 156.
- <sup>19</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 144–145. See also Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972). Clearly the responses to covid-19 is an example of this concern.
- <sup>20</sup> Sara E. Gorman and Jack M. Gorman, *Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Science That Will Save Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 47.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>23</sup> There is some evidence that being anti-science is connected to one’s geography and identity, particularly if one identifies as rural, even when living in an urban area. See Monica Potts, “Why Being Anti-Science Is Now Part of Many Rural Americans’ Identity,” *FiveThirtyEight* (Societal Distrust), April 25, 2022, 1–18, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-being-anti-science-is-now-part-of-many-rural-americans-identity/>
- <sup>24</sup> John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1929), 21.
- <sup>25</sup> John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 97.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> John Dewey, *How We Think* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), xxi.
- <sup>28</sup> Robert Westbrook, “George Herbert Mead and the Promise of Pragmatist Democracy,” in *The Timeliness of George Herbert Mead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 86.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 88. See also Christopher K. Ansell, *Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (London: Routledge, 2000); and William R. Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

- <sup>30</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 5.
- <sup>31</sup> John Dewey, “The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924,” vol. 1, in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969–1991), 81; John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1899).
- <sup>32</sup> Jeremy Gilbert, *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), viii.
- <sup>33</sup> Gorman and Gorman, *Denying to the Grave*, 25.
- <sup>34</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 148; John Dewey, “The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882–1898,” vol. 5, *Early Essays, 1895–1898*,” in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969–1991), 84.
- <sup>35</sup> John Saltmarsh, “Why Dewey Matters,” *The Good Society* 17, no. 2 (2008): 63–68. For the original source see Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett, *Dewey’s Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform: Civil Society, Public Schools, and Democratic Citizenship* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2007), 85.
- <sup>36</sup> John Dewey, “The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953,” vol. 11, in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969–1991), 219.
- <sup>37</sup> Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 187. Dewey’s view of the scientific community might be considered to be naive today due to our modern-day connection to capital, the military industrial complex, etc., however, it is science’s method of inquiry that he found central, although this can also be corrupted.
- <sup>38</sup> Alison Kadlec, *Dewey’s Critical Pragmatism* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 133.
- <sup>39</sup> Robert Westbrook, “George Herbert Mead and the Promise of Pragmatist Democracy,” in *The Timeliness of George Herbert Mead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>42</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 155.
- <sup>43</sup> Dewey, *LW*, vol. 11, 219. Dewey owes much to C. S. Peirce concerning this notion of a community of democratic inquirers.

See Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce: Selected and Edited with an Introduction by Justus Buchler* (New York: Dover, 1897), 38.

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