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Here We Go Again: The conspiracy theory freight train

RICHARD HIL

It didn't take long, did it? Yes; it's off and running – the COVID-19 freight train of conspiracy theories. I don't know about you, but I find many of these assumption-busting, adrenalin-charged forays down endless rabbit holes rather irritating, occasionally intriguing, but more often, very dangerous. For all their manifest failings, some conspiracy theories at least offer us a sense of fleeting interest; they take us away from those smug, settled positions which many, like me, hang on to for dear life. Whilst we're not all Pravda types, we're also not all that easily knocked off our perches of certainty; however critical we claim to be.

Conspiracy theories tend to find their epistemic treasures in the quarries of speculation – hunches, intuition and circumstantial guesswork. They're colourful, fascinating and invariably bizarre, sometimes bordering on the certifiable.

The latest crop of COVID-19 con theories are as predictable as they are outlandish. They include a range of florid assertions: namely, that the pandemic is:

1. A ghastly plot concocted by the CIA or US military through its biological warfare program to wipe out the entire Chinese population, or certain sections thereof – most likely the Central Politburo of the Communist Party.
2. A terrible accident in which a drunken CIA operative fell off a high stool in a Wuhan bar, causing him to shatter a vial of COVID-19 in his jacket pocket that was intended for release in Iran.
3. An elaborate cover for what is a global financial meltdown, thereby avoiding attributing blame to the usual suspects.
4. A virus exported around the world so that the People's Republic of China can become economic masters of the universe.
5. A virus released by the Chinese Government in order to deliberately kill off the country's elderly population, thereby significantly reducing pension costs in that country.

Now, let's for one moment entertain these theories. If true, some of them are not only suggesting grotesque acts of callousness/madness/idiocy but also – and here's the rub – a deliberate or unintended act of mass suicide in order to achieve some, not entirely obvious, higher purpose.

But who, according to the purveyors of such nonsense, are the evil planners behind such dastardly deeds? Well, we're never really told, but they seem to be imagined – perhaps in the vein of Dr Strangelove – as middle-aged patriarchs with bulging eyes and disconnected neurons. Each appears to be obsessed with world domination and collectively, they seem able to pull various financial and political strings, as skilfully as any puppet master.

The folk who report on such clandestine figures are an interesting lot. They're usually found in the most reclusive corners of the dark web or more than occasionally in full view on YouTube. The self-choreographed reportage is delivered by humourless men (women are notably absent in this scenscape), some with elaborate comb-overs and others with bandanas constraining long, straggly hair. Enscenced in dungeon-like studios, these chroniclers of the deep deliver 'truly shocking' assertions in the most dulcet of tones, suggesting a sense of gravitas anchored in uncontested truth. Dots are joined together and inferences drawn in story lines that often beggar belief which, of course, is even more reason to believe them. Their sources are rich and varied, including articles and 'academic' papers authored by self-appointed experts, or obsessive nit-pickers who claim to have stumbled across egregious factual errors. The discovery of the latter often leads to howls of joy, having apparently pulled the one domino that sends the entire establishment crashing down. It's fun because these amateur sleuths have ventured into fields they know little about, but with a joyful determination to expose dark secrets, corruption and malevolence. It's cerebral paintball via a keyboard.

One thing's for sure though: these late-night private detectives are no shrinking violets. They promote conspiracy theories with ferocious intent and will

viscerate opponents naive enough to offer an alternative point of view. They often round on public figures, trashing reputations through a toxic mix of inuendo, guilt-by-association and hearsay. At their very worst, conspiracy theorists round on entire populations, seeing them as responsible for all societal ills or as corruptors of morals and civilisation itself. This of course, can lead to some very violent outcomes, especially when appropriated by psychologically disturbed loners.

If you detect a hint of self-absorption bordering on the narcissistic among such individuals, you'd be right. They produce long, impermeable screeds otherwise referred to as manifestoes – vapid commentary infused with victimhood and hatred. They're intent on making you feel like an idiot; having exposed truths to which, apparently, only they or a few others have access. A key tactic in these discursive assaults is to befuddle and confuse by raising ceaseless unanswered and unanswerable questions. Once you think you've dispatched one claim, another arises. That's the point: to sow doubt, to confuse, to undermine, and to reinterpret and reformulate received wisdoms.

But, these folk do at times hit the mark, right? Yes, of course, but it's a bit like the monkey and the typewriter: they're bound to hit the right key at some point. There are times when tangible evidence supersedes guesswork, and that's when conspiracy theories can have some value. After all, we can agree, I think, that the official account of 9/11 is suspect? But if we're to assert, following this, that Mossad or the CIA or reptilians from outer space orchestrated this tragedy, then some concrete evidence would help. The thing is, we do need this thing called 'evidence', even if it's in an abstract form. We also need to pass the evidentiary test of reasonableness. Is it reasonable to assert that a reincarnation of Frank Zappa planned 9/11? Recently, an acquaintance of mine screamed into my face asking why I found it 'so very hard' to believe her latest theory (which was that the bushfires were started by some nefarious agents in order to clear land for mining). When I asked for some skeletal evidence, gasps of exasperation followed. On another occasion, another person informed me that all the assertions about President Putin being a ruthless autocrat who occasionally knocks off errant journalists or imprisons political opponents were in fact US propaganda. When I drew this person's attention to the 'fact' that the two Russian agents responsible for the poisoning of a former Russian spy in the small English town of Salisbury were caught on CCTV, I was called an apologist for the CIA. The logic here is simple: defend your original argument at all costs, reinterpret the 'evidence' to suit the prevailing story, and ridicule doubters. What I've learned from my many encounters with con theorists is that it's impossible to pin them down. There's no evidence that can dissuade

them. So, as Cassam (2019) points out in his excellent analysis of conspiracy thinking, a more effective tactic may be to expose the company they keep. So, let's take climate change deniers. You can spend the rest of your short life trying to address their liquid assertions. Instead, you may want to point out that the vast majority of the world's climate scientists, who have spent many years researching climate changes, tend to support the anthropogenic thesis, and that only a few think otherwise, ably supported by the likes of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Tony Abbott and Lord Monkton. Don't expect this to get you very far – you'll be accused of cynicism and ignorance. But then again, reptilians from the planet Zog would say that, wouldn't they?

Reference

Cassam, Q. 2019 *Conspiracy Theories*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

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Inception

I am, of course, the thimble top thing
that's still spinning, but I go deeper,
three layers further, so tell me you can't
taste snow on my lips, feel my soaking
clothes or smell the air hostess's
breath. I've spent centuries waiting
in this empty hotel for you to come
and simply say hello. And now you're here

you want to smell some common sense
and logic. Okay, I could have imagined
larger weapons more often to ward off
dreamt-up enemies, and the circular nature
of dream and reality made two dimensional
models of both. But try looking at a Parisian
outdoor café the same way again
or the slow opening of an elevator door.

PAUL MITCHELL