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Létourneau, Alain; Boogaart, Ronny; Garssen, Bart; Jansen, Henrike; Van Leeuwen, Maarten; Pilgram, Roosmaryn; Reuneker, Alex

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Remarks on the Challenge Raised to Argumentation Practice by Conspiracy Discourses

ALAIN LÉTOURNEAU

Department of Philosophy and Applied Ethics
Université de Sherbrooke
Canada
alain.letourneau@usherbrooke.ca

ABSTRACT: Conspiracy discourse (CD) holders seem impervious to rational argumentation based on validated argumentative schemes (Keely, 1999). The hypothesis here is that practicing a minimal recognition of claims and values might be a way to open dialogue in some cases. Following a dialectic method (Rescher, 2009) and Cassam's contribution (2021), I will get back to Lippmann's theory to clarify a conceptual dissociation (in Perelman's sense). The trucker convoy in Ottawa, Canada (2022) will serve as case study.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, Cassam, conspiracy, dialectic, discourse theory, dissociation, Ottawa, Perelman, Rescher, trucker convoy

1. INTRODUCTION

Many observers have remarked that in a plurality of countries, some people tend to fall prey to different forms of conspiracy talk. The proponents of these ideas about conspiracies are practicing dubious strategies among which the reversal of the burden of proof (Oswald, 2016, p. 14), where the discourse holder does not have to justify his/her claims but leaves the recipient to prove his/her own position – even if oftentimes it is quite well established by data, reports, publications of all kinds. What can argumentation and rhetoric do in front of such a situation? One task is certainly to show how the discourse works, to analyze the structural moves helping to clarify its characteristics, to build an argumentative profile (Wood & Douglas, 2013). The question asked here is different: at what conditions a dialogue can be established with people influenced by these discourses? Based on empirical exchanges, it can be supposed that not everyone that takes on some elements of conspiracy discourses is out of reach of dialogue. Obviously, I will not be able to develop the whole of what would be needed on such a topic, but I will focus on one of these conditions, taken from the point of view of the speaking person wanting to establish such a dialogue, with a close one, a friend or a known person. Therefore, the perspective is much more centered on individuals eventually embarked in those discourses, than on analyzing specific pieces; I leave on the side the real proponents, sometimes (and with good reason) called conspiracy entrepreneurs (Rotschild, 2021).

2. POINTS OF DEPARTURE

The stance taken here is what I call practical philosophy. I can shortly define it as a preoccupation to connect questions most of the times treated separately (ethics, politics, epistemology) while at the same time, being preoccupied by socially shared issues relevant to common action, that need to be treated in interdisciplinary settings – here the conspiracy phenomenon (Létourneau, 2020). Argumentation and rhetorical analysis can be distinguished with some overlaps (Tindale, 2004), but here they are situated inside that philosophical-practical perspective. In what follows, I use Perelman's dissociative strategy and also dialectical analysis, following N. Rescher's proposals from philosophy (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1990 (1958); Rescher, 2006; 2009).

Confronted to conspiracy productions, this perspective faces a double task: on the one hand, a minimum of refutation of the content of these discourses is unavoidable, not only because of lack of cogency and valid argumentation, but also because of political interests that include sometimes issues of public safety. Some of these groups can become radicalized, as was seen with the January 6th, 2021 events in Washington, D.C. involving many Q Anon sympathizers, among other groups (Dreisbach, 2022). It seems to me that the episode of the Freedom Convoy, in the winter of 2022 in Ottawa, Canada, also show this risk potential, even if these Canadian episodes didn't get too out of hand; I will come back to this particular case later – an impressive number of trucks blocking the capital city for almost a month.¹

But on the other hand, a critical approach, both ethical and political, should not just side with “the powerful” and the elite on difficult issues, for instance the pandemic and the response in terms of mandatory regulations. Furthermore, philosophy and argumentation scholars or practitioners might want to avoid concurring to the exclusion and/or complete isolation of persons who take up these discourses: that would be breaking down the bridges of dialogue and hardening rejection. As an example of stigmatization, people associated with antivaxx discourse, have been treated as “covidiot” on a regular basis during the pandemic: this can only exacerbate an already difficult situation between groups in society. There is no pure identity on the one side between proponents and opponents of science, and on the other with people from lesser or richer economic status, but it remains that some are more alienated than others, and access to knowledge is not always a given. Furthermore, studies show that many “hardcore” conspiracists might have very peculiar psychological tendencies (Hart & Greither, 2018) which might immunize them to different viewpoints. That group also has a large sphere of influence, and we can suppose that some sympathizers might not be irrecoverable. If we want to keep on living together in a plural society, we need a certain degree of mutual recognition as a condition for dialogue, at least in terms of relationships with people. Saying this is not implying that it is always possible, I recognize it has limits. But we need to distinguish between the core and the margins, occasional users and conspiracy leaders, these two situations cannot be treated the same way. The margin is what preoccupies me here.

¹ For some details on the many different events and the time frame, references can be found in the site of this public encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada_convoy_protest

3. BRIEF REVIEW

In recent decades, conspiracism has become a distinct field of research (especially since Grauman and Moscovici, 1987). A vast body of literature exists, which is expanding on several disciplinary fronts: political science and psychology, argumentation studies, philosophy, sociology, etc. Recent examples include from political science notably Sunstein & Vermeule, 2019, with the notion of “crippled epistemology” and precisely that attention to public security issues; and in social psychology Diegeuz and Delouvé, 2021; also Geoffroy, Boily and Nadeau 2022. In argumentation studies, D. Zarefsky (1984) and S. Oswald (with M. Lewinsky and others) in particular have retained attention; in philosophy, the impressive beginner was Karl R. Popper, in *Conjectures and Refutation* (1972) but since then several works have been important including Brian Keely (1999), and most recently Quassim Cassam's 2019 work.

There is a link of this topic with the much-discussed characteristics of our times being a “post-truth” era, into which conspiracy discourses seem to flourish. Lies are certainly not a recent invention, but many critics converge today in the idea that we're in this age exemplified by Bolsonaro and Trump, a culture of fake-news, all things which are facilitated by online platforms (Robert, 2021; Frankfurt, 2005) and AI (let us think of deepfakes as an example, e.g. an image of the pope Francis recently produced with machine guns). But the discussion of this type of phenomenon can be linked to the previous century with Dewey and Lippmann, we'll come back to this (Dewey, 1925; Lippmann, 1922). Basically, in a world of propaganda, as Hannah Arendt explained, the hallmark of totalitarian thinking is to no longer even distinguish between the true and the false (Arendt, 1976; 1951). We can't forget the fact that, still in April 2022, 35% of the American population, including 68% of Republicans, believed that Biden's November 2020 election was stolen - at least that's what they said when they were asked (Roose, 2021). Clearly, conspiracism is not unconnected with a political culture that seems to have broken away from the need for validated knowledge, and it seems to fit perfectly well in a war between ideologies and ways of life.

Karl Popper had already pointed out that one of the characteristics of conspiracy discourse is the idea of assigning a very specific reason to explain some of the unpleasant phenomenon that occur in our social life. These discourses provide a well-assigned, a simple and limited causality in lieu of asserting that people are just being paralyzed by the complexity of contemporary problems (Popper, 1972, 123-125). It's easier to identify a small group of alleged culprits, than to start thinking about the accumulation of unforeseen effects, not necessarily intentional, of human actions that have often been inspired by ordinary intentions. When reporting on conspiracist discourse of his day, Popper noted this problem of unintended indirect consequences, which are often multifactorial and therefore difficult to deal with.

Many commentators, among which Diegeuz and Delouvé, have underscored the affinity between CDs with narrative style, notably through the notion of plot (Diegeuz & Delouvé, 2021, 27-52). Conspiracy discourse tells a story, there's a direction and meaning, usually confronting perverse beings and innocent victims, and there's also often the “clue novel” aspect, which is not displeasing for the habits of a story-driven culture. Hollywood and their followers have trodden for decades on fictive conspiracies, and we sometimes wonder whether some people nowadays can still distinguish between the real and the

fictional. But I will not be able to treat mental health issues here; in that direction, critics have talked about a “paranoid style” that seems peculiar to CD. (Dieguez & Delouvée, 2021, 176 f.). In a different and opposed direction, CDs as ways to make sense of events can be seen as having value as such, some are considering them as religions (Robertson et al., 2018). For reasons to be detailed elsewhere, this direction for me is not to be followed, notably because that would endow these groups with new rights. That being said, the general freedoms recognized in the different charters of rights obviously apply.

4. DISCOURSES OR THEORIES?

It is usual in English to speak of Conspiracy Theories (CTs). But conspiracy allegations are most of the times not theories in the strict sense of the term, since a theory would be hypothetical in nature, which is not the case with most conspiracy discourses. Yes, these discourses claim to describe states of affairs and to provide explanations, precisely in terms of conspiracy. They pretend to offer some analysis, and therefore express cognitive claims. Oswald has clearly showed how these discourses imitate science as a part of their rhetoric (Oswald, 2016). But most of the times they lack a satisfying method of inquiry and are not open to consider their proposals as hypothetical, as any theory would. Another point that goes in the same sense: to treat them as theories is to dignify their status in a disproportionate way.

If by theory we mean an idea of any kind, categorically stated, often of an all-encompassing nature, that comes up with a secret, an evil explanation for something, then it's all right to talk about theories; but if we take theory to mean a set of hypotheses that are testable, verifiable and even falsifiable, then no, because these imaginative scaffolds are not theories at all. We are dealing with speeches having an explanatory claim, but they are speculations. Rhetorical moves aside, their discourses are not situated on a scale of modality, but rather as categorical assertions. This is true of Q Anon, but it's also true of other groups, such as the equally categorical Sovereign Citizens. Proponents of the Great Replacement are not considering a hypothesis; they are certain of what they put forward, even if they look like “doing their research” etc.

Talking of discourses instead, we can then allow that a given set of symbolic productions might comprise a lot of specific “theories” – for instance, inside the Q Anon discourse taken as a whole, a myriad of sub-theories has been developed, which are highly speculative and devoid of backing (Rotschild, 2021, 30). Talking in terms of conspiracy discourse allows us to focus on specific content that can be documented and studied, while avoiding more general reconstructions that summarize in broad strokes the strong and recurrent points of these contents. Therefore, I prefer to speak of conspiracy discourses or narratives than of theories. But obviously we can use a number of synonymous terms to describe the phenomenon.

5. SOME STRONG CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSPIRACY DISCOURSE

To better characterize CDs, we can draw on two concepts: symbolic amalgam and categorical statements, both of which are easy to control in discourse analysis. They could

also be interpreted under Dennett's meme theory, that is not limited to religious phenomena: groups of symbols, catchphrases and images that attract, offer an apparent advantage, and are therefore replicated and repeated (Dennett, 2006, 341-357), becoming an object for cultural epidemiology (Sperber, 1985).

Prima facie, a conspiracy discourse always puts on its imaginary scene a relatively small group of people, driven by sinister thinking and evil goals who have, as the word implies, secretly devised a plan of domination, which can be global in some cases and therefore all-encompassing, but not always. Plans can fit into plans like Russian dolls one into the other. The Protocol of the Elders of Zion is the classic example.

But how can we better characterize conspiracy talk? Here's the list of characteristics put forward by philosopher Q. Cassam. According to his analysis, CDs are first and foremost highly speculative. On the basis of minute clues, they make major theoretical leaps. Secondly, they are systematically opposed to the most obvious explanations that are available on a given phenomenon, discourse holders define themselves by their opposition to some Official Story (OS). For instance, the World Trade Center could not simply have been hit by Al Qaeda militants – the CIA is the real culprit. Third, they will look for details that do not fit with the Official Story and produce a leap of imagination on that basis; a glimpse in a photograph, some discrepancy between testimonies and accepted timetables. Fourth, their discourse is esoteric, it is a knowledge reserved for the few, not easily accessible; only the conspiracist and his followers can decode the details and know "the truth". Fifth, there's an amateurishness to these discourses, which emerge from a vast DIY enterprise; once again, based on a few bizarre elements, a scaffolding is built. Sixth, they reflect a totally anachronistic vision of the world - think of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion - or the idea that someone like Bill Gates could manipulate millions of people, including scientists, to insert microchips into vaccines is a rather archaic way of thinking. If you think about it, it implies a vision of the world restricted in size and complexity. Last but not least, these discourses (which he describes as "theories"), are completely immune to criticism, meaning that rational no argumentation can convince them. For me, this description is sufficient, even though it is a critical assessment. One missing element in Cassam's list is the concept of an alternative elite or source of knowledge that is at the basis of the phenomenon.

6. REAL OR IMAGINED CONSPIRACIES?

With others, I suggest it is necessary and required to distinguish between the investigation of real possible conspiracies and CDs. Many would agree that calling someone a conspiracy theorist or proponent is becoming pejorative nowadays. It would be paradoxical, however, to think that by universalizing the idea that conspiracy is a mentality with characteristics that we need to know more about in order to guard against it, we end up discrediting all research into genuine conspiracies. This would be a wholly undesirable consequence since it would make critical discussion impossible. Therefore, we have to be quite careful with this kind of talk: we have to recall to people that there have been real conspiracies, the Kennedy assassination, the attack on the World Trade Center and Washington in 2001, etc. But typically, with conspiracy as a mentality or ideology, these documented facts are seized upon to pretend to find behind them another, deeper, more mysterious and eviler layer of

conspiracy: it's the CIA that's behind 9/11! It was the deep state, controlled by the Cubans or the Russians, that had JFK assassinated.

So, let's start by going back to the need for distancing ourselves from conspiracy as a discourse, without abandoning another demand, that of maintaining in populations the critical sense that is indispensable to any democratic life. Drawing inspiration from Cassam, that would lead us to distinguish between real conspiracies (with a small c) and imaginary conspiracies (with a big C).

Yves Citton has recently suggested to distinguish between complotism and conspiracism, keeping the first word to describe phantasmagoric scenarios, and conspiracism to preserve a critical stance towards phenomenon that might be real, like capitalism. But this does not translate very well in English even though it might work in the French language (Citton, 2023, 62). And capitalism, in any case, does not as a whole qualify as a conspiracy. We can remain critical of our leaders and organizations, and also of the communication work of major agencies dedicated to some profitable end, without alleging a global conspiracy. Societies are dominated by certain economic and political elites: there is no secret here. This is also not the fact of a small clique of people acting out of Davos or something of the kind. To discuss factual inequalities in society is not esoteric, speculative or far-fetched, nor is it based on a few clues; it requires no special initiation in an enlightened club. Admitting this obviously does not imply to deny the existence of cover-ups, and communication campaigns to avoid responsibility; see the Tobacco industry, more recently the oil companies (Oreskes & Conway, 2010). The fact that there are real conspiracies does not imply that the whole System is a vast conspiracy.

7. LEADERS OR ORDINARY PEOPLE?

Another complication comes from the fact that there are two levels of discussion involved: the macro-social level and the individual, interpersonal level. We have creators or authors of CDs, and therefore we also have CD as a cultural and social phenomenon, but there is also users, people touched by it, that find themselves willingly or not in that cultural nebula. This raises a number of issues: access to valid knowledge, but also public safety, freedom of expression, recognition of a person's experience and reflection, the right to dissent, and even the democratic need for vigorous criticism. We can't treat individuals as if they were pure propagandists, even though there is no doubt that some discourses can be identified as propaganda; see Q Anon as an example (Rotschild, 2021). At the interpersonal level, the clinical approach seems required, each case being specific and different. Furthermore, it would be naïve and ineffective to just enact a theoretical refutation, since it is well understood that adherents of conspiracy discourse are often impervious to reasoned argument. To stop (or even to start) at sophistic refutation would not be sufficient. We have to look for what is actually motivating these discourses.

8. EMOTIONS AND VALUES OR IDEAS AND THEORIES?

One way to get out of that difficulty is by separating the cognitive content of an expression from its motivational sources. I will proceed here to a dissociation of notions, in Perelman's

spirit (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1990 (1958)). To distinguish between the expression of a claim and the meaning content of the discourse provides us with an important maneuvering space. It is a means to maintain a certain recognition of validity on the side of the person holding the CD, again supposing this person being not a hardcore proponent, which is a prerequisite for any dialogue, without abandoning the disconnection from content, e.g., the refutative part. But this is not only a rhetorical move; it is also backed by literature about public opinion phenomena, as I explain further on.

Emotion has a certain quality that, under certain conditions, can be recognized as meaningful. If we admit this, conspiracy discourse would then be understood as to speak of something other than what it purports to say. A candidate for this “other something” would be the feeling of social alienation in the face of an increasingly complex world. A better candidate yet might be values - but values and the alienation feeling can also go together. Let us comprehend values here as the elements (things, actions, states of being, desired results) to what people actually attribute importance, considering valuing as an act, not as a platonic content (Dewey, 1939). Values have a cognitive aspect, but it might not always be explicit in all cases. For instance, if I believe that to practice a sport helps me realize the value of health, this element can be held implicitly when I go for a run and talk about it with a friend.

About a century ago, in his well-known work *The Phantom Public* (1925), which had been preceded by a book entitled *Public Opinion* (1922), the political scientist and columnist Walter Lippmann dwelt on opinion and its place in democracy. He explained we cannot be satisfied with a normative view considering only the requests of democratic theory. There is not a structured public already endowed with given opinions. What is widespread in the population is disseminated and non-unified thoughts and ideas, images and symbols which are conveyed in various ways and widely echoed – this echoing phenomenon was already happening before social media. In this respect, he points out that we obviously don't have structured theories in “the public” generally speaking; rather, we have feelings, figures, key messages that have nothing to do with considered intellectual content for instance of a given political party or candidate; in fact, they are dissociated with such ideas. Here is John Dewey commenting Lippmann in his review of the latter's 1925 book, *The Phantom Public*:

The making of a general will out of a multitude of general wishes is not a Hegelian mystery, but an art well known to leaders, politicians and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas. Dewey, LW2, p. 215.

From the moment we accept this detachment between symbols and their intellectual content - a phenomenon that is fundamental to propaganda (Lippmann, 1922) - CDs become vehicles that don't matter primarily because of their “theoretical” content, as if they had to be treated as theories in due form, e.g. as speeches that may or may not be true. Rather, they matter because of what they signify, i.e., what people can and do decode in them.

To give an example, if we take the movement against restrictive measures during the Covid 19 pandemic, and of the anti-vaccination movement inside of it, there's no doubt that these movements were accompanied by conspiratorial discourses. But aren't we justified in seeing in them a demand for freedom, a rejection of the normative social constraints that became so strong at the heart of the pandemic, between 2020 and 2021?

On that basis, leaders with political will or aspirations did develop discourses that were aimed at rallying opposition, and some of them were both CDs and actual conspiracies, as was seen in Canada and even more so in the United States. Seeing a conspiracy at the “deep state” level, some leaders among the protesters of the January 6th events in Washington, D.C., were at the same time conspiring against the actual State’s electoral process.

9. CAN WE VALIDLY INTERPRET CONSPIRACIES? A CASE IN POINT

I'd now like to explore the possibility of finding a "meaning" for conspiracy discourses, as a basis for dialogue. This fundamental dissociation can be assumed from a hermeneutical point of view that has distanced itself from a Gadamerian posture postulating some “truth” of the discourses (Létourneau, 1998). The fact of decoding and interpreting a given discourse as the expression of an unstated claim doesn't imply attributing a truth value to conspiracy proposals, which in most cases are completely impossible to validate. But it does permit to establish a basis for dialogue, at some deeper level: precisely around values, emotions, felt needs or requests – and a mix of these. On the other hand, such decoding does imply a political reframing that explicitly serves as an interpretative framework for the decoder. At the very least, this must be made transparent in the interpreters’ work.

During Canada’s trucker episode in February 2022, thousands of truck drivers with family, friends and sympathizers occupied the city of Ottawa for almost a month, with some parallel movements in Québec city, Edmonton, Windsor, etc. Some copycat protests did emerge in Europe after that, but not with the same importance or effect. Many of the protagonists of this movement have used conspiracy discourses, especially James Bauder as the main initiator. Many movements participated: CanadaUnity (Bauder’s group, antivaxx and Q Anon sympathizers), Action4Canada, HoldFast, among others (Lind, 2022), and a group around the so-called Queen of Canada.

More recently, the focus of the media has largely been on Tamara Lich and Chris Barber, who coordinated the movement on the field.² The large participation that accompanied it was largely fueled by discontent with health measures, restrictions to travel for business (impossibility to pass the US frontier) and family reasons. The demand for an end to restrictions seem to have been the underlying motivation behind these cries of “libârté” or “freedom” - it was the key message to be decoded through that language of conspiracy. CDs in that context were symbols around which rallying was possible. In any case, after weeks of hesitancy notably with the city of Ottawa and the provincial

² As we complete this article, Lich and Barber are still in trial at the Ontario Court of Justice. “The charges against Lich and Barber include mischief, obstructing police, counselling others to commit mischief and intimidation”. The prosecution pleads a number of elements; they broke the law, refused to move even after the Emergency Act had been voted. According to their lawyers, the issue “will be whether the actions of two of the organizers of a peaceful protest should warrant criminal sanction.” One RCMP ex-officer who had to quit his job for refusing to be vaccinated had this comment: “a guilty decision will lead to a deeper divide among Canadians, and a “much deeper mistrust of the current existing legal system from the people that already feel disenfranchised, that supported the convoy.” All of this of course does not change the required necessity to act for the protection of the public good during the pandemic, vaccination is a validated practice.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/tamara-lich-chris-barber-trial-begins-1.6956948>. See also
<https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/trial-of-accused-convoy-leaders-lich-barber-a-guide-to-court-coverage>.

government of Ontario, the federal government removed the trucks. The following political debate focused especially on the legitimacy of the Emergency Act on the part of the Federal Government, with the Commission Rouleau or Public Order Emergency Commission (POEC, 2022). As Guizot said long ago, a good government is expected to have no one willing to conspire against it (Dieguez and Delouvé, 89).

Certainly, a number of conspiracy holders were at the center of this movement, in its often-marked departure from scientific data. Notably the talk about vaccines and governments colluding with big pharma, or Bill Gates with his 5G chips, were heard, and did not bother to back itself with data, studies or reports. But the fact that it was riddled with frivolous theories didn't prevent the message from getting through in the end; decision makers understood the meaning of all this, which was simpler than the conspiracy discourse held by leaders. Other factors intervened in the political decision to ease the restrictions; but they also can be seen as a response to this demand, which was understood as going far beyond the truckers' movement alone.³

10. CONCLUSION

What were these speeches about? These discourses speak of their transmitters and creators and in a populist manner, they play on the feelings, fears and values of its recipients, but they have no referent, and therefore no truth value in the traditional sense. They can be decoded as showing something about their producers and potential receivers. They are essentially wholesale denials of credibility for anything resembling official discourse, linked to what exists as social order. Can the social order as it exists, for some people at least, be experienced as alienating? If the answer is yes, then conspiratorial discourse seems to be an expression of this feeling.

However, the question of the feasibility of the dialogue I envision here based on these distinctions, remains uncertain. Much of the literature argues and no doubt rightly so, that we have with CDs a set of convictions held with vigor, in an approach that is precisely categorical and not receptive to nuance and reinterpretation. Still, the hypothesis could be tested, with the following supposition: not all the people rephrasing bits and pieces of conspiracy discourse are irrecoverable or lost forever to shared reason.

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³ <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/news/2022/09/government-of-canada-to-remove-covid-19-border-and-travel-measures-effective-october-1.html> The abolition of restrictive measures did not happen right away, but close enough for the protesters to declare their (relatively late) victory.

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