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“On the philosophy of conspiracy theories: A philosophy of science perspective on the epistemology of conspiracy theories and approach towards a general demarcation of unwarranted and warranted conspiracy theories - Are there general criteria which demarcate warranted cases of conspiracy theories from unwarranted ones?”

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“Enemies of truth: Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.”

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human*<sup>1</sup>

“I want to believe.” – Subtitle of a movie based on the *The X-Files* TV-series.

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche 1878, 169

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## 1. Introduction

“Historically, blatantly untrue and defamatory conspiracy theories had disastrous consequences for those who were portrayed in them as evildoers. At the same time, conspiratorial agreements at the expense of the common good between powerful groups in society do exist and have occasionally been uncovered.”<sup>2</sup>

A lot of people take a dim view of “conspiracy theories”. In the academic literature they are often characterized as irrational, especially when they compete with official rival explanations. In the domain of philosophy some philosophers, such as Mandlik, Clarke and Boudry consider (certain types of) conspiracy theories as *prima facie* irrational, ie. *generalism*, while others such as Dentith, Pidgen and Coady hold that there is nothing epistemically wrong with conspiracy theories *per se* and that they should thus be evaluated on their particular evidential merits, ie. *particularism*. But there seem to be characteristic issues associated with CTs that have received attention way before the myriad of conspiracy theories about the COVID 19 pandemic.

This thesis concerns the issue of the demarcation of unwarranted conspiracy theories from their warranted and legitimate counterparts. The literature on the epistemology of conspiracy theories is discussed and general criteria of demarcation are derived, which are then put in

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<sup>2</sup> Heins 2007, 1

conjunction as to constitute a list of multiple criteria analogously to multi-criterial approaches to demarcation in philosophy of science's traditional demarcation problem. Furthermore, concerning conspiracy theory theory, ie. the study of conspiracy theories, a moderate version of particularism is defended.

After starting with some preliminary remarks in section 2 contextualizing the approach of this thesis with philosophy of science's traditional demarcation problem of the demarcation of science from pseudoscience different definitions of "conspiracy theory" as well as the working definition of this thesis are discussed in section 3. Section 4 discusses different paradigmatic examples of warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories cited in the literature. Before the standard criticisms that are rejected by particularists are discussed in section 6, section 5 is dedicated to the epistemological structure of conspiracy theories examining various features typically associated with conspiracy theories. Section 7 concerns the derivation of demarcation criteria from different approaches in the literature including the approaches of Steve Clarke evaluating conspiracy theories in terms of Lakatosian scientific research programs, Brian Keeley arguing for a criterion to reject unwarranted conspiracy theories as well as Mathew Dentith's approach of identifying recurrent suspicious features of conspiracy theories and Boudry's approach of arguing for a demarcation criterion defending a stance he terms *moderate generalism*. Section 8 then discusses the criteria and compiles the criteria derived in the previous section to constitute a list which is then, in section 9, applied to the paradigmatic examples laid out in section 4 as to test the criteria's practical utility. Before concluding in section 12, section 10 concerns conspiracy theory theory and defends a moderate form of *particularism* and section 11 concerns the phenomenon of conspiracism, where the insights of this thesis are applied and an argument that justifies some amount of *prima facie* suspicion in the sense of the reasonable expectation that an encountered conspiracy theory, when being confronted with a new conspiracy theory, will likely turn out to be false is put forward.

## **2. Preliminary remarks**

Regarding criteria of demarcation for conspiracy theories it is useful to start with some introductory remarks concerning philosophy of science's discussion on the problem of demarcating science from pseudoscience.

The issue of demarcation is a contentious one in philosophy of science. Some philosophers flat out deny that a clear demarcation of science and pseudoscience is possible and regard the term

“pseudoscience” as an empty term.<sup>3</sup> Other philosophers, although agreeing that a clear-cut demarcation in the sense of necessary and sufficient conditions for “science” or “pseudoscience” is not possible in a general sense, propose different accounts and argue that meaningful and useful demarcation criteria can be provided. Although there is disagreement about whether demarcation is possible and about which criteria are adequate there seems to be a broad consensus among experts about which single examples legitimately count as pseudoscience rather than science (eg. Astronomy/Astrology).<sup>4</sup>

The ultimate question of demarcation is, broadly speaking, “how to determine which beliefs are epistemically warranted”.<sup>5</sup> Meaning that demarcation criteria ought to draw the line between epistemically justified scientific theorizing and unjustified non-scientific or pseudoscientific theorizing.

A general definition of “science”, which includes the natural sciences as well as the social sciences and humanities, describes the human endeavour of science as „systematic and critical investigations aimed at acquiring the best possible understanding of the workings of nature, people, and human society.”<sup>6</sup> Pseudoscience on the other hand is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as: “A pretended or spurious science; a collection of related beliefs about the world mistakenly regarded as being based on scientific method or as having the status that scientific truths now have.”<sup>7</sup>

Historically different approaches to demarcation focused on one single criterion, such as falsifiability. But one key problem of demarcation is that “science” is a highly multifaceted and heterogenous enterprise so that it is doubtful whether a set of jointly necessary and sufficient conditions can be given that encompass all of what is subsumed under the term “science” while excluding all pseudoscience. After Karl Popper’s proposal of the falsifiability criterion turned out to be insufficient, Larry Laudan famously declared the issue of demarcation as dead.<sup>8</sup>

The debate however has been revitalized in recent years and different kinds of approaches have been proposed. Giving up the search for necessary and sufficient conditions, Pigliucci proposes

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<sup>3</sup> Pigliucci 2013, 2

<sup>4</sup> cf. Pigliucci; Boudry 2013, 2

<sup>5</sup> Hansson 2021, § 3.1

<sup>6</sup> Hansson 2021, § 3.3

<sup>7</sup> Oxford English Dictionary 2022

<sup>8</sup> Laudan 1983, 125

an approach to demarcation oriented on Wittgensteinian family resemblance, and other authors propose similar cluster concept-like multi-criterial approaches.<sup>9</sup>

Such recent approaches propose lists of *multiple criteria* that are in combination supposed to be able to identify pseudoscience. Consider one such list:

1. *Belief in authority*: It is contended that some person or persons have a special ability to determine what is true or false. Others have to accept their judgments.
2. *Unrepeatable experiments*: Reliance is put on experiments that cannot be repeated by others with the same outcome.
3. *Handpicked examples*: Handpicked examples are used although they are not representative of the general category that the investigation refers to.
4. *Unwillingness to test*: A theory is not tested although it is possible to test it.
5. *Disregard of refuting information*: Observations or experiments that conflict with a theory are neglected.
6. *Built-in subterfuge*: The testing of a theory is so arranged that the theory can only be confirmed, never disconfirmed, by the outcome.
7. *Explanations are abandoned without replacement*. Tenable explanations are given up without being replaced, so that the new theory leaves much more unexplained than the previous one.<sup>10</sup>

Such accounts have been defended as superior to approaches with only one single criterion.

In a similar manner it is not the aim of this thesis to work out necessary and sufficient conditions that apply to all cases, since in the domain of conspiracy theories such an approach seems ill-fated. The aim is rather to work out multiple criteria of demarcation that, although not necessary and sufficient, indicate the warrant of a particular theory and constitute a useful tool for examining the merit of investigation and the warrant of particular conspiracy theories.

Regarding some terminology:

I will use the term “conspiracy theorist” to refer to people endorsing one or more conspiracy theories. In accordance with Dentith I use the term “conspiracy theory theorist” for academics theorizing about conspiracy theories and the term “conspiracy theory skeptics” for people that are generally skeptical of conspiracy theories. The term “conspiracism/conspiracist” refers to some special kind of belief in conspiracy theories discussed in section 3.4. Definitions of the term “conspiracy theory” will be discussed throughout section 3 and my working definition for this thesis is presented in section 3.2. I will use the acronyms “CT” for “conspiracy theory

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<sup>9</sup> cf. Pigliucci 2013, 19

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 1

throughout this thesis as a matter of convenience. The term “warranted” in this context refers to the justification of beliefs relative to the available evidence in question.

A CT can be unwarranted in two ways, 1) it is true but does not yet have gained warrant, we consider it unwarranted since the available evidence does not justify belief in the theory or 2) it is clearly false and disproven according to the available evidence and thus ought to be rejected as unwarranted.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. What are “conspiracy theories” (CTs)

To illuminate what exactly “conspiracy theories” are, this section concerns some general remarks followed by sections discussing proposed definitions and paradigmatic examples.

Conspiracy theories (CTs) are historical/intentional explanations/theories of events, with the event being assumed to have been brought about by a conspiracy. As such, CTs consist of a set of statements and take the form of explanations consisting of premises which posit a set of conspirators as well as some shared desire and a conclusion claimed to follow from the premises that infers the cause of the event as a result of the actions of the conspirators. An analytic definition of the two parts of the term “conspiracy theory” would suggest that a CT is just any theory about conspiracy. Colloquially, the term has negative connotations as manifested in expressions as “This is just a conspiracy theory”, or “I’m not a conspiracy theorist but ...” that imply that CTs are usually inferior kinds of explanation that can be dismissed as unfounded. Indeed, colloquially the term refers only to alternative explanations that contrast some official account of the same event so that corroborated and widely accepted conspiracies and explanations of them, such as the Watergate scandal, are not considered as CTs. In this sense of the colloquial meaning one might think that the dismissal of such CTs contrasting official explanations is warranted but it is worth noting that claims of conspiracy regarding the above-mentioned Watergate scandal originally had been alternative explanations contrasting some official statements of the officials involved. So even though the officialness of explanations might be a good indicator for the warrant of explanations in some cases, it does not follow that unofficial explanations can or should be dismissed outright.

Philosophers have been attentive to the aspect that CTs should not be dismissed *qua* being CTs. In the academic literature in the domain of philosophy there are two main stances on CTs:

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<sup>11</sup> cf. Dentith 2022, 10

*Particularism*<sup>12</sup> holds that CTs ought not to be dismissed qua being CTs but should be judged by their individual evidential merits, while *generalism*<sup>13</sup> holds that CTs, or at least some subclass of CTs, are to be dismissed in general due to epistemic flaws. Examples of generalists are philosophers such as Steve Clarke, Pete Mandlik and Maarten Boudry, and among the particularists are philosophers such as Mathew Dentith, Kurtis Hagen, David Coady and Charles Pidgen. The particularism/generalism distinction is discussed in depth in section 3.3.

### 3.1 Different definitions of “conspiracy theory”

Before settling on a working definition, it is useful to consider the wide range of definitions that have been proposed by different academic disciplines and authors. Before discussing the different definitions, it is worth noting that “conspiracy” is also a legal term and criminal law in some countries. In the legal sense a “conspiracy” is “an agreement between two or more persons to commit a crime in some time in the future.”<sup>14</sup> Due to the methodological approach and goals specific to different research fields the proposed definitions will vary but are useful to consider for the philosophical debate. Mathew Dentith provided a minimal definition as well as an overview and a taxonomy of different definitions:

Dentith defines a “conspiracy” with the following individually necessary and jointly sufficient criteria:

1. There exists (or has existed) some set of agents who plan,
2. Some end is/was desired by the agents, and
3. Steps have been taken to minimise public awareness of what the agents are up to.<sup>15</sup>

A “conspiracy theory” then is, according to Dentith, “an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause”.<sup>16</sup> Most particularists subscribe to such minimal and broad definition. Dentith’s analysis then proceeds with distinguishing epistemically warranted and epistemically unwarranted examples of CTs.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines CTs as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> cf. Dentith 2012; Hagen 2022; Pidgen 1995; Coady 2007

<sup>13</sup> cf. Clarke 2000; Mandlik 2008; Keeley 1999

<sup>14</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conspiracy\\_\(criminal\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conspiracy_(criminal))

<sup>15</sup> Dentith 2012, 16

<sup>16</sup> Dentith 2012, 19

“...the theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties; spec. a belief that some covert but influential agency (typically political in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an unexplained event”.<sup>17</sup>

Political commentator Robin Ramsay identifies two kinds of conspiracy theories:

Firstly, “hypotheses about the existence of conspiracies, belief in which suggests the believer is suffering from some form of acute paranoia” and secondly, “warranted explanations that happen to cite conspiratorial activity as a cause of the event.”<sup>18</sup> Ramsay stresses that those two kinds ought not to be conflated.

Journalist David Aaronovitch, arguing CTs are generally irrational, defines CTs as follows:

[T]he attribution of deliberate agency to something that is more likely to be accidental or unintended. And, as a sophistication of this definition, one might add: the attribution of secret action to one party that might far more reasonably be explained as the less covert and less complicated action of another. So a conspiracy theory is the unnecessary assumption of conspiracy when other explanations are more probable.<sup>19</sup>

As Dentith states, according to such definition a theory citing a conspiracy as the cause of an event would not count as a CT if it was the best explanation.<sup>20</sup>

The historian Geoffrey Cubitt defines a CT as “explanation which suggests that there is a hidden reality beyond the superficial appearance of the political world”<sup>21</sup>:

Considered at the most schematic level, then, a conspiracy theory does three things: it attributes the events of history or current affairs to conscious human volition; it sharply distinguishes between the human forces of good and evil; it implies a hidden reality beneath and at odds with the superficial appearances of the political and social world.<sup>22</sup>

While Cubitt acknowledges that conspiracies occurred throughout history, he regards belief in CTs as irrational because “they are explanations which mischaracterize the nature of conspiratorial activity in history”.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Oxford English Dictionary 2022

<sup>18</sup> Robin Ramsey as cited in Dentith 2012, 20

<sup>19</sup> David Aaronovitch as cited in Dentith 2012, 21

<sup>20</sup> cf. Dentith 2012, 21

<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt as cited in Dentith 2012, 22

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt as cited in Dentith 2012, 22

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt as cited in Dentith 2012, 22

Historian Vicortia Emma Pagán refers to CTs as “conspiracy narratives” and defines them as “characterized by an epistemological gap caused by the secrecy and silence that shroud the event.”<sup>24</sup>

According to the sociologist Mark Fenster “endorsement of conspiracy theories as explanations show that conspiracy theorists are people who do not understand the complex nature of power relations in our society”, CTs are “symptomatic of a paranoid belief that conspiracies are a powerful factor in history”.<sup>25</sup> But Fenster regards the conspiracy theorist’s suspicion about the unjustness and unequalness of society as not completely unfounded.<sup>26</sup>

This characterization is similar to Richard Hofstadter’s, who regards CTs as “mistaken reaction to a world where it seems that all the political social power is out of the reach of the common person.”<sup>27</sup>

Sociologist Veronique Campion-Vincent regards CTs as “an attempt to explain how we, as individuals, cope with a complex and ever-changing world” and defines them as “theories about the existence of immoral actions undertaken by powerful conspirators”.<sup>28</sup>

The psychologist Dieter Groh characterizes CTs as „explanations which appeal to the actions of god-like conspirators who also happen to be fallible and thus whose activities are easily detected.”<sup>29</sup>

Psychologist Skip Willman regards CTs as “symptomatic of a desire to explain the state of the world by postulating that there is at least one person out there who is responsible for what is happening in it”.<sup>30</sup> And the psychologist Fran Mason argues that CTs are “taken to be good explanations only by conspiracy theorists”, to non-conspiracy theorists on the other hand “such theories are just the conclusions of fallacious reasoning”.<sup>31</sup>

In philosophy there is a growing body of literature on CTs with recent interest having sparked around two decades ago. Brian Keeley defined CTs as follows: “[A] proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons-the conspirators-acting [sic] in secret.”<sup>32</sup> Keeley concluded that there is “no

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<sup>24</sup> Vicortia Emma Pagán as cited in Dentith 2012, 22

<sup>25</sup> Mark Fenster as cited in Dentith 2012, 23

<sup>26</sup> cf. Dentith 2012, 23

<sup>27</sup> Richard Hofstadter as cited in Dentith 2012, 24

<sup>28</sup> Veronique Campion-Vincent as cited in Dentith 2012, 24

<sup>29</sup> Dieter Groh as cited in Dentith 2012, 25

<sup>30</sup> Skip Willman as cited in Dentith 2012, 25

<sup>31</sup> Fran Mason as cited in Dentith 2012, 25

<sup>32</sup> Keeley 1999, 116

criterion or set of criteria that provide a priori grounds for distinguishing warranted conspiracy theories from UCTs”<sup>33</sup>

Keeley’s definition of *unwarranted* conspiracy theories (UCTs) has the following five characteristics:

1. A UCT is an explanation that runs counter to some received, official, or “obvious” account.
2. The true intentions behind the conspiracy are invariably nefarious.
3. UCTs typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events.
4. The truths behind events explained by conspiracy theories are typically well-guarded secrets, even if the ultimate perpetrators are sometimes well-known public figures.
5. The chief tool of the conspiracy theorists is what I shall call “errant data.”<sup>34</sup>

Charles Pidgen defined CTs as follows: “[A] conspiracy theory is simply a theory that posits a conspiracy – a secret plan on the part of some group to influence events by partly secret means”, with an addition his in earlier work adding that “... either the plan or the action must be morally suspect, at least to some people.”<sup>35</sup>

Lee Basham defines a CT in the following way:

[An] explanation of important events that appeals to the intentional deception and manipulation of those involved in, affected by, or witnessing these events. These deceptions/manipulations involve multiple, cooperating players. While there is no contradiction in the phrase “conspiracies of goodness”, the deceptions and manipulations implied by the term “conspiracy theory” are usually thought to express nefarious, even insanely evil, purposes.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore:

Conspiracy theories, warranted or not, follow a two-step pattern: First, they undermine official accounts via *striking incongruities*. Next, they offer plausible but conspiratorial

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<sup>33</sup> Keeley 1999, 118

<sup>34</sup> Brian Keeley as cited in Dentith 2012, 27

<sup>35</sup> Charles Pidgen as cited in Dentith 2012, 27

<sup>36</sup> Lee Basham as cited in Dentith 2012, 29

accounts that incorporate the incongruities into a framework where these then become wholly congruent.<sup>37</sup>

This second part of the definition refers to what is called “errant data”, data that is explained by one theory but not by competing ones. The use of errant data in conspiracy theorizing is discussed in detail in section 5.1.

Steve Clarke regards CTs as Lakatosian research programmes:

A particular conspiracy theory needs at least to involve the identification of a specific conspiratorial group and to involve the specification [of] at least one motive to explain that group’s conspiratorial activities before the research programme formed around that theory can be assessed as progressive or degenerative.<sup>38</sup>

David Coady defines a CT as follows:

A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of an historical event, in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event which it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an ‘official’ explanation of the same historical event.<sup>39</sup>

Buentin and Taylor agree with Coady’s definition and emphasize the last clause putting forward the condition of conflict with official explanations.<sup>40</sup>

Neil Levy defines a CT as: “[A]n explanation of an event in terms of the plans and coordinated actions of a secretive group of conspirators” and argues that CTs that stands in opposition to an “official story, where the official story is the explanation offered by the (relevant) *epistemic authorities*, are *prima facie* unwarranted.”<sup>41</sup>

Pete Mandlik proposed five conditions which are necessary and in combination sufficient for something to be a CT:

Conspiracy theories postulate:

1. explanations of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>38</sup> Carke 2007,170

<sup>39</sup> David Coady as cited in Dentith 2012, 31

<sup>40</sup> Buentin; Taylor 2010, 568

<sup>41</sup> Levy 2007, 181-182

2. historical events in terms of
3. intentional states of multiple agents (the conspirators) who, among other things,
4. intended the historical events in question to occur and
5. keep their intentions and actions secret.<sup>42</sup>

Juha Räikkä follows Keeley's definition but adds that: "Conspiracy theories that aim to explain only limited historical phenomena are often warranted, i.e. they provide the (more or less) correct explanation of events" and "official explanations can be theories and they can refer to conspiracies, but they cannot be conspiracy theories (unless they are official explanations of wrong authorities)."<sup>43</sup> With the former condition of the explanation of limited historical phenomena Räikkä distinguishes this form of CTs from so called "total conspiracy theories which are long-ranging conspiracies", which he regards as *prima facie* irrational.<sup>44</sup> This distinction mirrors distinctions drawn concerning the size and scope of a conspiracy that are supposed to be relevant to the epistemic merits.

For Keith Harris what is characteristic of a CT is that it:

- (1) Posits an explanation for a target event or set of target events that is alternative to the official account of the event(s).
- (2) Claims that the event(s) was/were brought about by one or more conspirators.
- (3) Posits that the architects of the event(s) are involved in promoting the official account.
- (4) Has greater explanatory power than the official account.<sup>45</sup>

David Hahn defines "conspiracy theory" as an "alternative explanation of an event/phenomenon, for which the central thesis is the deliberate concealment of the true explanation by a group of actors, for which the evidence is inadequate to sustain the claim."<sup>46</sup>

Napolitano on the other hand defines CTs as "a way of holding a conspiratorial belief" exhibiting a distinctive "self-insulating" quality that renders them immune to counterevidence.<sup>47</sup>

Quassim Cassam defines a subset of conspiracy theories, that he labels "Conspiracy Theories" with capital letters "C" and "T", in terms of their function as "*first and foremost forms of*

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<sup>42</sup> Mandik 2007, 206

<sup>43</sup> Juha Räikkä as cited in Dentith 2012, 34

<sup>44</sup> Juha Räikkä as cited in Dentith 2012, 34

<sup>45</sup> Harris 2018, 236-237

<sup>46</sup> Hahn 2020, 29

<sup>47</sup> Napolitano 2021, 89

*political propaganda*.”<sup>48</sup> Properties that he attributes to this class of CTs are being “speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish and premodern.”<sup>49</sup>

According to Dentith’s taxonomy there are three different kinds of things called “conspiracy theories” in the literature: 1) A “very general view that conspiracy theory is just an explanation involving a conspiracy”, 2) a “specific sub-type of the general definition which is about sinister political forces”, and 3) the idea “that a conspiracy theory is some sort of explanation of a phenomenon that arises out of a more general tendency to think that unseen (and mysterious) agencies have control over a significant amount of our society.”<sup>50</sup>

The multitude of definitions implies difficulties for the debate on CTs as well as the possibility of equivocations and highlights the importance of precise language.

Regarding the typology of CTs it is also useful to distinguish different types of CT, concerning the *scope* for example the distinction of large-scale conspiracies and single event conspiracies has been emphasized. Michael Barkun emphasized the distinction of “event conspiracies”, “systemic conspiracies” and “superconspiracies”, and Juhu Räikka a distinction of “local”, “global” and “total” CTs in the same manner as Daniel Pipes who emphasizes a similar distinction of “petty” and “world” conspiracies.<sup>51</sup> The basic idea is that an event conspiracy concerns a single event while a systemic conspiracy involves a whole system, for example a government or some kind of institution, that is corrupted. In Barkun’s framework superconspiracies then encompass both event and systemic conspiracies, they are “all-embracing conspiracies in which powerful and malevolent forces seek to control the world through multiple conspiracies.”<sup>52</sup> It is contended that the scope of a conspiracy alleged by a CT as well as the number of conspirators has implications on the warrant of the CT since single event conspiracies seem *prima facie* more probable than all-encompassing global conspiracies.<sup>53</sup>

Regarding the *domain*, the class of political CTs can be distinguished from science- or medicine related CTs. Hahn draws a similar distinction in terms of ideological and academic CTs.<sup>54</sup> Such distinctions can be fuzzy because these domains can overlap, for example when a medical CT has obvious political implications as is the case with vaccination CTs but on the other hand

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<sup>48</sup> Cassam 2019, 11

<sup>49</sup> Cassam 2019, 20

<sup>50</sup> Dentith 2012, 35-36

<sup>51</sup> Michael Barkun and Daniel Pipes as cited in: Dentith 2014, 42; cf. Barkun 2003, 6; cf. Räikka 2009, 186

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 43

<sup>53</sup> cf. Ibid., 43

<sup>54</sup> Hahn 2020, 29

some CTs have no obvious political implications such as the flat earth CT. The idea behind such distinction is that conspiracies in the domain of the political also seem *prima facie* more probable than conspiracies in the domain of science since the latter exhibits stronger checks and balances.

### 3.2 Discussing the different definitions of “conspiracy theory”

Some of the proposed definitions are in conflict and it seems like different authors and disciplines talk about different classes of conspiracy theories. Although the differences may be explained by the different research goals and methodological approaches, the result is some kind of equivocation in the discourse about “conspiracy theories”. And this is where the philosopher’s profession of clarifying terms and concepts can be of use.

Despite the differences it is also easy to see that the different proposed definitions overlap at certain points. The most commonly mentioned features are that CTs are 1) *explanations* (or theories, hypotheses) that explain some 2) *event* (or phenomenon) by means of the 3) *causal role of a group of conspirators* 4) *acting in secret*. These features are pretty much equivalent to Dentith’s minimal definition.

Sometimes a clause of 5) *nefarious intent* is added to include only malevolent conspiracies and exclude “conspiracies of goodness” as well as a clause of 6) *oppositional status* of the explanations contrasting some officially endorsed explanations of the target events. Related to point 6) some definitions emphasize 7) *epistemic defects* rendering CTs as (usually) irrational, for example due to the attribution of god-like powers to the conspirators or overemphasis on intentional aspects over situational aspects.

The clauses 1-4 represent the kind of general definition Dentith and Pidgen emphasize while the additional clauses 5-7 are narrower in scope, by excluding official explanations and “conspiracies of goodness” as CTs and are closer to the colloquial use of the term, which is illustrated by the fact that such definitions mirror elements of the pejorative connotation of the colloquial meaning.

An interesting and seemingly odd implication resulting from definitions that include the clause of being in opposition with some official explanation is that CTs can, if they gain official status via mainstream acceptance, lose their status as CT, while a CT is a CT on the broad account independent of its officialness.

For the aim of this thesis, which is to examine and evaluate demarcation criteria, I will settle on Dentith's general definition of CTs as "an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause", since it is the broadest definition including most cases.<sup>55</sup> This broad definition has some issues as it includes trivial and uninteresting cases such as the planning of surprise birthday parties or business meetings but since the narrower definitions run the risk of excluding interesting cases the broad and most minimal definition is better suited relative to the aim of the thesis. The goal is then to examine, starting from a general definition, what additional features or criteria render CTs unwarranted.

I elaborate on Keeley's account of "unwarranted conspiracy theory" (UCT) and supply it, beside the conditions Keeley proposed, with the criteria derived from other approaches in the literature. A UCT is unwarranted for either of the following reasons: (1) There exists/existed a conspiracy but the available evidence is insufficient to expose it, or (2) There exists/existed no conspiracy, which is the precise reason that the available evidence is insufficient.

### 3.3 Generalism and particularism about CTs

What is also apparent from the overview of different definitions in section 3.1 is that some definitions render CTs irrational *per se*. This illustrates the generalism/particularism distinction mentioned in section 3. Consider for example Hahn who includes that "the evidence is inadequate to substantiate the claim" in his definition or Napolitano's approach focusing on a specific way of holding a belief that is insulated from counterevidence and thus irrational.<sup>56</sup> The definitions from the historians, sociologists and psychologists focus on irrational aspects in a similar manner by including aspects like the attribution of god-like powers and intelligence to the conspirators, a "paranoid" style of thinking or the function of coping with the complex world we live in.

Pidgen argues that the generalist stance is influenced by the "conventional wisdom", that he regards as mistaken and as a "modern day superstition".<sup>57</sup> The conventional wisdom about CTs states

that they ought not to be believed. To call something 'a conspiracy theory' is to suggest that it is intellectually suspect; to call someone 'a conspiracy theorist' is to suggest that he is irrational, paranoid or perverse. Often the suggestion seems to be that conspiracy theories

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<sup>55</sup> Dentith 2012, 19

<sup>56</sup> Hahn 2020, 29

<sup>57</sup> Pidgen 2007, 219; Dentith 2014, 18

are not just suspect, but utterly unbelievable, too silly to deserve the effort of a serious refutation.<sup>58</sup>

Philosophers subscribing to the broad definition of CT, like Dentith and Pidgen, argue that “every politically and historically literate person is a conspiracy theorist”<sup>59</sup>:

*Premise I:* Unless you believe that the reports of history books and the nightly news are largely false, you are a conspiracy theorist (since history and the nightly news are choc-a-bloc with conspiracies).

*Premise II:* If you *do* believe that the reports of history books and the nightly news are largely false, you are a conspiracy theorist (since you presumably believe that somebody has conspired to fake them).

*Conclusion:* You are a conspiracy theorist.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, particularists subscribing to the broad definition of CTs, such as Dentith, argue that generalist approaches are only concerned with a subset of the whole class of CTs. Particularists likewise argue that the fact that unwarranted and false CTs and epistemically flawed conspiracy theorizing exist does not justify a generalization about CTs and conspiracy theorists in general.

### 3.4 Conspiracism

“Conspiracism” refers to a particular problem with belief in CTs. Dentith defines conspiracism as: “The view that *belief* in conspiracy theories is typically due to, or caused by, factors other than there being good arguments or evidence in favor of such theories.”<sup>61</sup> What exactly counts as evidence and good evidence is a complex matter in the domain of CTs, the role of evidence will be discussed in detail in section 4.

One might consider conspiracism as resulting from some kind of cognitive biases resulting in the endorsement of one explanation over another without adequate support or as resulting from endorsing CTs merely for political or ideological reasons with disregard for the particular arguments and evidence in question.

The thesis of conspiracism is at the core of the social science research into CTs but Dentith stresses that this thesis is only concerned with a subset of conspiracy theorists and does not justify a generalization about the broader class.<sup>62</sup> This is because all conspiracists are conspiracy

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<sup>58</sup> Pidgen 2007, 219

<sup>59</sup> Dentith 2014, ix [Foreword]

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., ix

<sup>61</sup> Dentith 2018a, 7

<sup>62</sup> cf. Ibid., 15

theorists but not all conspiracy theorists are conspiracists. As will be discussed in section 5.4, CTs have certain properties, which are consistent within the internal logic of CTs, that render them to some extent immune to refutation and make believe in them hard to shake.

Dentith worries that particular wacky conspiracy theorists/conspiracists such as Alex Jones or David Icke, are taken to be representative of CTs and conspiracy theorists in general, which is of course an unjustified inference.<sup>63</sup>

Alex Jones is a monetarily very successful conspiracy-entrepreneur who spreads CTs on his program *Infowars* for years and got rich by, among other things, selling dietary supplements to his audience. Due to the outlandish CTs he proposes he is widely considered as prototype of a “crazy” conspiracy theorist. Jones has recently been found guilty of defamation of multiple family members of victims of the Sandy Hook school-shooting in 2012, due to his spread of the UCT of a faked mass shooting which is covered in section 4.1 and was sentenced to pay millions of dollars as punitive damage.<sup>64</sup>

One possibility to consider is that conspiracism is not only explained by the type of conspiracy theorist and kind of belief but also by the kind of CTs that are believed: That is that conspiracism results from belief in unwarranted CTs and is supported by the above-mentioned characteristics that make believe in them hard to shake.

#### **4. Paradigmatic examples of warranted CTs and unwarranted CTs**

Before examining the epistemic characteristics of CTs in section 5 it is useful to sketch out some paradigmatic examples of CTs, both warranted (WCTs) and unwarranted (UCTs). Examples of WCTs that are discussed are the Watergate scandal, the Moscow show trials, the Edward Snowden NSA surveillance scandal and the CIA’s project MKUltra. Examples of UCTs being discussed are the Sandy-Hook school-shooting hoax theory UCT, the Oklahoma City bombings UCT, the 9/11 inside job/controlled demolition UCT and Illuminati new world order UCTs. These examples, that I take to be illustrative of some of the relevant features of CTs, are used for the evaluation of the derived demarcation criteria in section 9.

##### **4.1 Sandy Hook school-shooting crisis actor hoax UCT**

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<sup>63</sup> cf. Ibid., 1

<sup>64</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/article/alex-jones-trial.html>

According to the official explanation on December 14 in 2012, 20 year old Adam Lanza shot 26 people at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut in the USA before committing suicide.<sup>65</sup> After the event CTs started circulating claiming that “the whole episode was an elaborate hoax by the government, a classic false flag operation in which no one died”.<sup>66</sup> Conspiracy theorist Alex Jones famously endorsed such UCT on his internet program *Info Wars* claiming that the victims of the shooting and the grieving parents of the victims portrayed in media reports were in fact “crisis actors”, ie. individuals who portray disaster victims in first responder training exercises. The aim of this elaborate government hoax then, according to Alex Jones, is for the government to fabricate a reason to push for legislation regulating gun ownership.

Note that this CT makes several positive claims that can be verified/falsified and was as such quickly refuted. Most notably besides claims about the supposed conspirators in the government and the media and about the aim of fabricating an event to push legislation, the claims that nobody died in that event and that “crisis actors” merely acted as victims on camera. Furthermore, simply applying Occams razor, ie. the principle of parsimony, strongly supports the official explanation and casts doubt on the CT as alternative explanation. This UCT is considered as unwarranted because the available evidence indicates the opposite.

As Cassam states, the more likely explanation is that: “Lanza really did shoot twenty-six people at Sandy Hook, and that was a potential problem for the gun lobby. What better way to preempt calls for tighter gun control in the wake of a mass shooting than to claim that the shooting never happened?”<sup>67</sup> This UCT thus serves as a prime example of Cassam’s conception of CTs as tools for political propaganda.

It is also worth noting that the content of such CT, being the staging of a mass shooting fabricated to push for stronger gun legislation, can be seen as some kind of recurring narrative that frequently emerges after such tragic incidents.

Reconstructed as a formal explanation the official explanation may look as follows:

P1: Adam Lanza planned to commit a mass-shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary school.

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Cassam 2019, 11

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 11

P2: On December 14 in 2012 the individual Adam Lanza, as a result of the combination of mental health problems, life circumstances and access to deadly weapons, decided to carry out his planned mass-shooting

C: At the Sandy Hook Elementary school a tragic mass-shooting occurred on December 14, 2012 with twenty-six people ending up being killed before the shooter Adam Lanza committed suicide.

The reconstruction of the CT about this event may look as follows:

P1': It seems that another mass-shooting event has taken place on December 14 in 2012 at the Sandy Hook Elementary school.

P2': Such an event is very convenient for the proponents of stronger gun legislation (*cui bono?*).

P3': It may be the case that the event was staged for exactly those political purposes and that crisis actors acted as the victims that were seen on the news programs, thus this is a possible explanation.

P4': The media appearance of victims and family members related to that incidence is faked.

C': The event at the Sandy Hook Elementary school did not in fact take place, it was instead staged by the government in an elaborate plot to put in place gun control laws.

#### **4.2 Oklahoma City bombing UCTs**

The example of the Oklahoma City bombing UCT is frequently mentioned in the literature since Keeley's influential 1999 paper. The official explanation of the event in question states that on April 19 in 1999 the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was destroyed by a huge explosion after a rental truck with ammonium nitrate and fuel bombs inside was parked in front of the building by army veteran Timothy McVeigh, who was supported by his co-conspirators Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier.<sup>68</sup> After initial suspicion was focused on the possible involvement of middle eastern terrorism, Timothy McVeigh who had been arrested the day of the bombing for driving without a license plate and carrying a concealed weapon was soon identified as John Doe and linked to the bombings.<sup>69</sup> The investigation finished with a conviction of McVeigh for the "use of a Weapon of Mass Destruction" and several other

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<sup>68</sup> cf. Keeley 1999, 112-114

<sup>69</sup> cf. Ibid., 113

charges including First-degree murder; Nichols was convicted for manslaughter and conspiracy and Fortier got away with lesser charges.<sup>70</sup>

The CTs about the event emerged within days after the event focusing on facts that were unexplained by or apparently contradictory to the official account of the events. Among these facts were the existence of an unidentified person, called “John Doe #2”, eyewitnesses claimed to have seen with McVeigh or the seemingly odd behavior of McVeigh after the bombing, for example that he drove a car without license plates and made no efforts to resist arrest.<sup>71</sup>

The UCTs allege government involvement of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) that was located inside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. According to these CTs the BATF either was forewarned about the crime and did not manage to prevent it which led to a cover-up of their wrongdoing, or they were actively involved in the preparation with the intent to prevent the crime in the last minute in an effort to increase their public image and McVeigh was simply a convenient patsy.<sup>72</sup> After the FBI was brought into the investigation and did not report of a BATF conspiracy, conspiracy theorists considered the FBI as well as members of the media as part of the conspiracy and were thus widening the circle of conspirators.<sup>73</sup>

These CTs are considered as being UCTs because the official account turns out to be a better explanation of the available evidence and is hence to be preferred in terms of an inference to the best explanation and because investigations looking into these CTs did not come up with corroborating evidence.

#### **4.3 9/11 controlled demolition/inside job UCT**

The controlled demolition UCT about the collapse of the World Trade Center buildings on September 11, 2001 is a frequently mentioned example in the philosophical literature on CTs. According to the official account of the events, which philosophers subscribing to a broad definition of CTs also regard as a CT since a conspiracy was involved in bringing about the event, terrorists abducted planes and flew them into the WTC buildings and that the plane-crashes into the buildings as well as the subsequent collapse was a result of terrorist activity by the group Al-Qaida.

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<sup>70</sup> cf. Ibid., 113

<sup>71</sup> cf. Ibid., 114-115

<sup>72</sup> cf. Ibid., 115

<sup>73</sup> cf. Ibid., 122

The controlled demolition/inside job CT states that the plane crashes could not have brought down the buildings, also citing building 7 that was only burning and not even hit by a plane and still collapsed, but that the collapses were rather caused by a controlled demolition due to explosives set up inside the buildings plotted by the US government in order to justify intervention in the middle east.<sup>74</sup> This CT is resulting of ignorance to certain sets of data, such as the videotaped admission of Osama Bin Laden, and emphasis on certain pieces of data that are considered to be improbable relative to the official explanation.<sup>75</sup> Controlled demolition theorists contend for example that the fire caused by the plane-crashes would not have reached high enough temperatures as to melt the steel beams supporting the buildings, ignoring findings of the official report that the temperatures reached, being up to 1200° Celsius, are very well able to sufficiently impact steels stability as to result in a collapse.<sup>76</sup>

This UCT is considered as unwarranted and false since the official explanation fits the available facts better, since positive claims made by the CT have been refuted and since other aspects speak to the falsity of such claims, for example that no substantiating evidence surfaced two decades after the events occurred, which would be expected given the large scope of such an operation. Also note that if the buildings had indeed collapsed due to a controlled demolition, the abducted airplanes crashing into two WTC buildings as well as the Pentagon building would have merely served as a cover up of the actual cause of the collapse, which seems to be an unrealistic enterprise, especially contrasted with the official explanation.

#### **4.4 Illuminati New World Order UCT**

Illuminati UCTs have been very popular in popular culture as such themes are mirrored in novels and works of fiction. The official explanation of what the “Illuminati” were goes as follows: During the enlightenment era in 1774 Bavarian philosopher Adam Weishaupt founded a secret society called the “Illuminati” with the aim to promote “equality and fraternity for all men”<sup>77</sup>. The Illuminati aimed to achieve this by infiltrating different influential freemason lodges and the institution of the absolutist state before the Illuminati were disbanded by an edict after the Bavarian government found out about their activities in 1785.<sup>78</sup> And according to orthodox history this was the end of the Illuminati and their aim for equality.

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<sup>74</sup> cf. Dentith 2014, 131

<sup>75</sup> cf. Dentith 2014, 130

<sup>76</sup> cf. Clarke 2007, 171; Shyam-Sunder et al. 2005, 132

<sup>77</sup> Dentith 2014, 1

<sup>78</sup> cf. Ibid., 1

According to the UCTs about the Illuminati the secret society merely went underground in 1785 and continued pursuing their aims, which are considered as nefarious ends to achieve world domination.<sup>79</sup> According to conspiracy theorists the Illuminati were quite successful in shaping the course of history by being responsible for the French- and American Revolution and the formation of the United States of America.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore the Illuminati supposedly brought about the American civil war as well as economic depressions with which they achieved “a global system of financial control”.<sup>81</sup> CTs about the Illuminati often exhibit antisemitic features in the sense that the Illuminati are associated with jews which fits the stereotype of Jewish affinity to finance.<sup>82</sup> The main claim of this UCT is thus that the Illuminati still exist and “control the world behind the scenes”.<sup>83</sup>

Evidence that is cited in favor of such UCTs is focused on symbolism: Since the Illuminati were a secret society its members used to communicate via symbols to arrange meeting times and locations to avoid catching attention. Proponents of this UCT connect symbols, for example the pyramids or the eye of providence, figuring in movies or music videos to the existence of the Illuminati.<sup>84</sup> As such this UCT is motivated by “the desire to believe and find patterns and intent where none exist” and is thus mainly supported by belief.<sup>85</sup> Regarding the typology of CTs this CT is a global CT that can as such be invoked to be responsible for particular event CTs.

These UCTs are considered unwarranted for similar reasons as the examples discussed above: The available evidence strongly favors the official explanation; the assumptions made by the theory seem *prima facie* unreasonable since it would have to be assumed that such secret society would exist for hundreds of years actively pursuing an aim and remaining more or less stable in motivation and goals without leaving traces of evidence that would document their existence. Furthermore, all the different historical and political events that are ascribed to be caused by the Illuminati seem to be events that could not even be thoroughly planned out, events such as economic depressions are influenced by a myriad of factors and events such as revolutions and wars seem to be similar in this regard. As such there are more simple explanations of these events than the assumption of a grand conspiracy orchestrating all of them.

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<sup>79</sup> cf. Ibid., 1

<sup>80</sup> cf. Ibid., 1

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>82</sup> cf. Hahn 2020, 105

<sup>83</sup> Dentith 2014, 3

<sup>84</sup> cf. Hahn 2020, 109

<sup>85</sup> Hahn 2020, 109

#### 4.5 Watergate conspiracy WCT

Turning to WCTs now, one of the most commonly cited examples of warranted CTs is President Nixon's "Watergate" scandal consisting of a cover-up of the wiretapping and break-in in the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters in 1972.

The CT, which has advanced to an official explanation, states that members of the Republican party conspired in 1972 to break into the DNC to wiretap their political opponents with President Nixon having knowledge of these activities, having lied about it and having engaged in a cover-up and lied about that.<sup>86</sup> The conspiracy was eventually uncovered due to thorough investigation by the *Washington Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and by suspicious gaps in the recordings of the President's phone conversations and subsequent evidence surfacing of communication about said event.<sup>87</sup>

Note that President Nixon initially denied any knowledge and that the explanation of government officials was considered as official while the CT the journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein investigated and eventually proved was an unofficial rival explanation at the time the investigation started. Accordingly, they were initially vilified for pursuing their story as it was considered a CT that casts doubt onto the political system and government institutions and was thus regarded as harmful.<sup>88</sup>

This CT is considered warranted since it fits the available evidence and has been proven to be the case. Also, there exist no other tenable rival explanations of the event in question, as such this initially unofficial CT has advanced to the status of an official explanation.

#### 4.6 Moscow show trials conspiracy WCT

Another example of a warranted CT that has initially been an alternative rival explanation to an official account, of the Soviet government in this case, is the Moscow Show Trials CT covering the unfair trials and verdicts Joseph Stalin orchestrated against his political opponents in the 1930s:

In the 1930s Joseph Stalin, the leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was convinced that his former ally (but now enemy-in-exile) Leon Trotsky was plotting to take control of Russia. So concerned was Stalin about this possibility that he ordered his agents

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<sup>86</sup> cf. Dentith 2014, 141

<sup>87</sup> cf. Ibid., 141

<sup>88</sup> cf. Ibid., 74

to keep close tabs on not just Trotsky but also those who might still be sympathetic to his cause. When the said agents reported back, claiming that Trotsky did not appear to be involved in any conspiracy to depose Stalin, Stalin ordered the arrest of the ‘sympathisers’ anyway. The arrestees were subsequently tortured, both physically and psychologically, for a number of months. Over this time they were persuaded to give false testimony: ‘Yes!’ they said, ‘we have been conspiring both to sabotage Stalin’s regime and to install Trotsky as the new leader of the Soviet Union.’<sup>89</sup>

Then a series of show trials had been conducted that ‘uncovered’ this conspiracy against Stalin and the assurance that the trials were conducted fair was accepted by both the governments of the USA and the UK.<sup>90</sup>

After the announcement of the trial verdicts a rival explanation emerged claiming that the trials and verdicts “were a sham” and that “Trotsky had been set up and innocent women and men had been executed in order to legitimize Stalin’s continued attempts to get rid of his political rival.”<sup>91</sup> This rival explanation was motivated by the independent investigation into the evidence cited in the trials conducted by a group of Trotsky supporters and concerned citizen headed by the philosopher John Dewey, also known as the Dewey Commission.<sup>92</sup> After almost 20 years this rival explanation was finally confirmed when Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death, admitted that the trials were a sham in 1956.<sup>93</sup>

This WCT then is considered as warranted since the investigation raised serious doubts about the officially endorsed explanation of the Soviet government and since its truth was admitted by Nikita Khrushchev years later.

#### **4.7 Edward Snowden NSA surveillance conspiracy WCT**

The 2013 National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance scandal that resulted from the release of internal documents that whistleblower Edward Snowden leaked to the press is one example that is cited to illustrate that conspiracies do occur in modern society.<sup>94</sup>

The scandal, roughly, consisted of the revelation that intelligence agencies such as the NSA, an intelligence agency that is concerned with foreign affairs, would surveil the phone communications of the citizens of the USA as well as of people and even country leaders around the

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<sup>89</sup> Dentith 2014, 87

<sup>90</sup> cf. Ibid., 87

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 93

<sup>92</sup> cf. Ibid., 93

<sup>93</sup> cf. Dentith 2014, 93

<sup>94</sup> cf. Ibid., 155

globe without court orders or any initial suspicion whatsoever. Before substantiating evidence was leaked in 2013 such theory concerning such a large-scale conspiracy would probably have been considered as outlandish by most people.

This CT has the status of being true and warranted because the amount of evidence contained in the leaked documents and the first-hand testimony as well as the subsequent investigation committees corroborated this explanation of events.

#### **4.8 MKUltra conspiracy WCT**

“MKUltra” is a code name referring to a Cold War era illegal CIA program experimenting forms of brainwashing and psychological torture with, among other interventions, the covert administration of high doses of psychoactive drugs such as LSD for reasons of national security.<sup>95</sup> One of the aim was for example to know whether Soviet spies could be made to defect against their will and whether the Soviets could do the same.<sup>96</sup> The CIA’s project MKUltra took place in the Cold War era and started in 1953, was reduced in scope in 1964 and 1967 and was terminated in 1973.<sup>97</sup> During this time the CIA “engaged in various clandestine operations to manipulate the human mind.”<sup>98</sup> Project MKUltra was preceded by two other programs called Project Bluebird and Project Artichoke which also were concerned with the effect of drugs on behavior and the study of different interrogation methods and methods to influence mind and behavior.<sup>99</sup>

Among the objectives of the program were “discovering means of conditioning personnel to prevent unauthorized extraction of information from them”, “investigating the possibility of control of an individual by application of special interrogation techniques”, “memory enhancement”, the search of a “truth drug” and “establishing defensive means for preventing hostile control of Agency personnel.”<sup>100</sup> Another aim included the desire to create a “Manchurian candidate”, referring to “individuals that could be used to act in a certain way against their will, for the CIA use” referencing the idea of a 1959 novel.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> See the Wikipedia article on “MKUltra” – <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MKUltra>

<sup>96</sup> See the Wikipedia article on “MKUltra” – <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MKUltra>

<sup>97</sup> See the Wikipedia article on “MKUltra” – <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MKUltra>

<sup>98</sup> Linville 2016, 1

<sup>99</sup> See the Wikipedia article on “MKUltra” – <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MKUltra>

<sup>100</sup> Linville 2016, 3

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 3

During the time of the program experiments were conducted on witting and unwitting American citizens which included some deaths although the full extent of the deaths and harm committed remains unknown.<sup>102</sup>

Eventually a lot of documentation was destroyed after “Richard Helms, director of the CIA, ordered the destruction of controversial documents in 1973.”<sup>103</sup> The conspiracy was eventually uncovered and brought to public attention in 1975 due to efforts of the commissions created to oversee and investigate intelligence agencies that were put in place after the Watergate scandal.<sup>104</sup> In a 1977 hearing Senator Kennedy stated that “[p]roject MKULTRA was a direct violation of basic human rights and ethical standards set in place by the Hippocratic Oath, the U.S. Constitution, the Nuremberg Code, and the UN Declaration of Human Rights.”<sup>105</sup>

It is interesting to note that this WCT also gave rise to UCTs asserting that the CIA was successful in their efforts to achieve mind control and in manufacturing a “Manchurian candidate”. It is then asserted that such mind control techniques are frequently employed, and that Manchurian candidates are the cause of some terrorist activity or amok shootings.

## 5. Epistemology of CTs – Common characteristics

As got clear from section 3, CTs are commonly regarded as unwarranted as is exemplified by Richard Hofstadters influential notion of the *paranoid style of thinking*. Thus, conspiracy theory skepticism is a prevalent view in the academic literature.<sup>106</sup> The philosophical literature, especially the particularist tradition, has taken a more charitable approach towards CTs by emphasizing a broad definition and by warning about overgeneralization from particular cases.

To infer to the existence of a conspiracy one has to infer to the group of conspirators involved, to their intentions and to their causal agency in bringing about the event. For a CT to be warranted and advanced to the level of a substantiated official explanation there needs to be some amount of positive evidence, as is the case with the 9/11 Al-Qaida theory or the theory about Nixon’s involvement and cover-up of the Watergate scandal. CTs have certain characteristics that differentiate them from other types of theories or explanations. One aspect is that conspiracies are, by definition, acted out in secret and conspirators try to minimize public awareness,

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<sup>102</sup> See the Wikipedia article on “MKUltra” – <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MKUltra>

<sup>103</sup> Linville 2016, 2

<sup>104</sup> cf. Ibid., 1

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>106</sup> cf. Ibid., 8

it will thus usually be difficult to identify conspirators and to infer to their existence and intentions. As such, claims about conspiracy sometimes tend to be vague, which is sort of expected due to the subject matter, but which can affect the falsifiability of CTs. As will be discussed, the aspect of limited falsifiability does not count against CTs *per se* since the accommodation of certain amounts of counterevidence is baked into the epistemological structure of CTs, is hence expected and cannot be considered *ad hoc*. Related to the aspect of falsifiability is the role of evidence, since because of the secrecy condition it can be expected that disinformation and fabricated or tampered evidence is produced as a cover-up if a conspiracy occurs. The claims about conspiracy CTs make usually concern conspiracies that are supposed to be ongoing or conspiracies about past events, where the supposed conspirators and thus the true cause is assumed to not have been uncovered. Especially CTs that rival official explanations are often considered as epistemically problematic.<sup>107</sup>

Regarding the epistemology of CTs the aspects of errant data, of the role of evidence and of the limited falsifiability are discussed in this section before the “standard criticism” of CTs is discussed and evaluated in section 6.

## 5.1 Errant data

Keeley included what he called “errant data” as a necessary component of his definition of UCTs, as such errant data are only constitutive of a subclass of conspiracy theories, namely CTs that rival official explanations.

Errant data comes in two forms, being 1) *contradictory data*, ie. data that, if true, would contradict a theory and 2) *unaccounted-for data*, ie. data that are unaccounted for relative to one theory but do not contradict it.<sup>108</sup> Basically errant data is “information that is not part of the pool of evidence for some explanatory hypothesis but can be construed as evidence for a rival hypothesis.”<sup>109</sup> Errant data are not a feature unique to CTs but a feature that is assumed to play a key role in the construction of alternative rival conspiratorial hypotheses that contradict official versions of events via apparent unaccounted-for and contradictory data of the official account. But errant data alone is not a problem for CTs since given “the imperfect nature of our human understanding of the world, we should *expect* that even the best possible theory would

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<sup>107</sup> cf. Keeley 1999, 118

<sup>108</sup> cf. Keeley 1999, 118

<sup>109</sup> Dentith 2014, 129

not explain *all* the available data. One's theory should not fit *all* the available data, because not all the available data are, in fact, true."<sup>110</sup>

Applied to the aforementioned example of the Oklahoma City bombing UCT Keeley illustrates these types of data as follows: As pieces of unaccounted-for data Keeley identifies "early reports that the BATF had prior warning of the Oklahoma City bombing and the fact that no BATF employees were in the building at the time of the explosion", which is unaccounted for by the received explanation.<sup>111</sup> As contradictory data Keeley identifies "McVeigh's manifest idiocy in fleeing the scene of the bombing in a car without license plates [...] as conspiratorial ringleader capable of planning and carrying out such a terrorist operation."<sup>112</sup> It is worth noting that such sets of errant data seem to be unlikely relative to the official theory, but the fact that some piece of data is improbable does not entail that this probability did not indeed obtain. And as Keeley noted not all pieces of data are in fact true, as is the case with unusual events like bombings or terrorist attacks since it is not unlikely that certain eyewitness testimonies might contradict each other as such events are happening suddenly, witnesses are usually in panic and the location of witnesses may vary and as such one would reasonably expect that such testimony will lack high degrees of reliability.

Applied to the 9/11 inside job CT some piece of unaccounted-for data is exemplified by the fact that one of the plane-hijackers passports was found intact on the streets of Manhattan after having been on the exploding plane, which is an unlikely occurrence.<sup>113</sup> As piece of contradictory data eyewitness testimony is emphasized which stated that explosions were heard in the lower parts of the towers before the collapse.<sup>114</sup> This datum is interpreted to substantiate claims about a controlled demolition of the towers and the fact that they could not have been brought down by the impact of the planes and the fires alone. Conspiracy theory skeptics on the other hand note that such perceived explosions in the lower parts of the towers are consistent with the jet-fueled fires that spread around the upper areas and through the elevator shafts of the Twin Towers.

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<sup>110</sup> Keeley 1999, 120

<sup>111</sup> Keeley 1999, 118

<sup>112</sup> cf. Keeley 1999, 118

<sup>113</sup> For a breakdown and "debunking" of this claim see: <https://www.911facts.dk/?p=7595&lang=en>

<sup>114</sup> cf. Clarke 2007, 173

Keely regards errant data as crucial for the construction of UCTs. Their “typical logic” starts with errant facts and the inference that these facts that are unaccounted for by the official story imply intentional ignorance and thus a conspiracy.<sup>115</sup>

## 5.2 Explanatory power and vice epistemology

CTs sometimes tend to be vague, they nonetheless exhibit some explanatory virtues: Keeley stresses that CTs exhibit several explanatory virtues, for example the “virtue of unified explanation and explanatory reach”, meaning that “all things being equal, the better theory is the one that provides a unified explanation of more phenomena than competing explanations.”<sup>116</sup> CTs, Keeley states, “always explain more than competing theories, because by invoking a conspiracy, they can explain both the data of the received account and the errant data that the received theory fails to explain.”<sup>117</sup> So, CTs seem to always explain more than their official rivals since the CT gives an alternative account of the events and explains the prominence of the received explanation as cover-up set out by the conspirators. As such CTs “offer wonderfully unified accounts of all the data at hand, both those the official story explains, plus those niggling, overlooked errant data.”<sup>118</sup> This means that even unwarranted and false CTs exhibit such feature of being unified explanations, which might in combination with the resistance to refutation go some way in explaining the appeal of CTs and persistence of conspiracy belief.

It has also been argued that the epistemic virtues, for example a devotion to uncovering the truth and intellectual diligence, that conspiracy theorists exhibit are mixed with epistemic vices, such as closed-mindedness, gullibility and selectivity biases, “that jointly impede successful inquiry.”<sup>119</sup> As such one attempted generalist critique of a subtype of conspiracy theorists based on virtue epistemology offers an explanation of epistemically flawed CTs with reference to the cocktail of epistemological virtues and vices distorting inquiry.<sup>120</sup>

In terms of predictions Keeley argues that CTs usually predict disinformation and falsifying evidence as they assume the effort of conspirators trying to minimize public awareness and avoid detection. This poses a special problem regarding the role of evidence and the falsifiability of CTs in relation to the aspect of public trust and the official status of explanations.

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<sup>115</sup> cf. Keeley 1999, 119

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 119

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 119

<sup>118</sup> Keeley 1999, 119

<sup>119</sup> Harris 2018, 253; cf. Cassam 2019, 67

<sup>120</sup> cf. Cassam 2019, 67

### 5.3 Limited falsifiability

CTs are seemingly the only theories that are able to construe a lack of evidence and even counterevidence as evidence in favor of the theory, since it is expected that the object of study, being the conspirators and their intentions, actively resist being studied and might even produce disinformation. This is because conspiracy theories predict disinformation, ie. fabricated evidence that serves as a cover up put out by the conspirators, which is to be expected if a conspiracy occurred. Thus, CTs are of limited falsifiability unless they posit positive claims that can be falsified by observation. It is worth noting that this unfalsifiability is not *ad hoc* but results from predicted falsifying data that are assumed to be promoted by the conspirators and are thus expected.<sup>121</sup> As such Keeley regards falsifiability not as problematic in this instance since “unfalsifiability is only a reasonable criterion in cases where we do not have reason to believe that there are powerful agents seeking to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter.”<sup>122</sup>

Consider for example the cases of the 9/11 inside job hypothesis, which makes positive claims for example regarding the claim about jet-fuel being insufficient for melting the steel beams of the towers. This claim has been thoroughly tested and refuted<sup>123</sup>, which did not stop 9/11 inside job conspiracy theorists to maintain their belief and simply disregard this piece of evidence as fabricated by the real conspirators. Note that this dismissal of evidence is related to the aspect of public trust, which is considered to be impacted by conspiracy theorizing. For, if the government X is suspected of conspiracy and illegal wrongdoings, exonerative evidence that is put forward by related government institutions is likely to be dismissed by conspiracy theorists with the assumption that such institutions are likewise part of the conspiracy.

But even if non-falsifiability is not an issue for CTs *per se*, there are issues associated with non-falsifiability that are discussed in section 7 regarding criteria of demarcation.

### 5.4 Role of evidence, public trust and officialness

As discussed in section 5.1 errant data are regarded as chief tool of CTs. In relation to the limited falsifiability, the role of evidence is of special interest. The dismissal of counterevidence on behalf of conspiracy theorists is motivated by the somewhat reasonable expectation of fabricated falsifying evidence. Since conspirators are often powerful people such as government

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<sup>121</sup> cf. Keeley 1999, 121

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 121

<sup>123</sup> Shyam-Sunder et al. 2005, 21; 132

officials, conspiracy theorists convinced of their theory will tend to dismiss counterevidence when brought forward by public institutions or epistemic authorities. When more and more counterevidence, which contradicts/refutes the CT surfaces, the move made to maintain belief in the CT in question employed by conspiracy theorists is usually to extend the circle of conspirators and include various media agencies that published said evidence.

As such conspiracy theorists have been accused of being selective with evidence, but selectiveness is by no means an issue unique to CTs. Dentith defines “selectiveness” as: “The activity of presenting an explanation that uses evidence that has been selected from a wider pool of evidence to make a candidate explanation look warranted when it otherwise might not be.”<sup>124</sup> Applied to the 9/11 inside job UCT the selective use of evidence may be illustrated by 1) the emphasis put on the observation that the collapse of the towers looked, to a layman, like a collapse caused by a controlled demolition while at the same time ignoring 2) the videotaped message of Osama bin Laden, in which he admitted to having been behind the plot.<sup>125</sup>

Dentith defines “disinformation” as the “activity of presenting fabricated information in support of a candidate explanation in order to make a candidate explanation warranted when it otherwise might not be.”<sup>126</sup> Thus, selectiveness and disinformation, both from the conspiracy theorists as well as from the proponents of the official explanation impedes inferring to the occurrence of a conspiracy.

It is interesting to note that CTs rivaling official explanations tend to, as Keeley described, focus on apparent contradictions and unaccounted for data, ie. negative evidence and dismiss positive evidence in favor of the official explanation while CTs themselves often tend to be vague in stating positive claims, which, as described, can be expected if a conspiracy indeed occurred. Since CTs often rival official explanations, they tend to undermine the officially endorsed explanations of governments or epistemic authorities which can lead to a decrease of trust in public institutions. In relation to this the question of the warrant of officially endorsed theories is of relevance. Usually, official endorsements of theories or explanations are accepted with a higher amount of confidence and trust than their unofficial counterparts. However, it is especially important which institutions give theories their official status: For example, the case of theories endorsed by the relevant epistemic authorities in science, or the academic sector seem to be *prima facie* more probable than theories that are endorsed merely by political authorities. This stems from the kinds of checks and balances in science that are not present in a similar

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<sup>124</sup> Dentith 2014, 125

<sup>125</sup> cf. Ibid., 130

<sup>126</sup> cf. Ibid., 128

manner in the domain of politics.<sup>127</sup> The quality of the official endorsement is also time and place relative: Endorsements from politicians of current-day European democratic societies seem *prima facie* more likely to be warranted than endorsements of politicians in the 1930s in the Soviet Union, as the case of the Moscow Show Trials highlights, which relates to the openness of the societies in question. The line of officialness can also be blurry; consider for example Donald Trump's election fraud UCT that led to the January 6 riots/insurrection that was endorsed officially by the president of the USA, although it was sneered at by other politicians and branches of the government as well as courts.

So, generally officialdom can be an indicator to judge the warrant of particular theories or hypotheses, but officialdom cannot serve as necessary and sufficient criterion to assess a theory as warranted and true since explanations can be officially endorsed by the epistemic authorities and still turn out to be false and likewise unofficial explanations can turn out to be true. Furthermore, the trustworthiness of official explanations is dependent on the specific domain and institution as well as on the openness of the society and political system in question.

### **5.5 Conspiracies, the issue of prior probability and openness**

The assessment of whether a given CT is warranted and likely to be true or unwarranted and likely to be false depends on the prior probability of undetected conspiracies one ascribes to the society in question.<sup>128</sup> As Dentith puts it, the issue of prior probability boils down to the question: "Just how conspired is our world?"<sup>129</sup> The prior probability of conspiracies occurring is related to the openness of the society as it is assumed that conducting and getting away with a conspiracy is easier in more closed and authoritarian societies. As such this assessment will vary between agents, depending on a variety of factors such as earlier experience of conspiracies occurring or trust in authorities more generally. The crux of the question of the prior probability of the likelihood of undetected conspiracies occurring is that it cannot be assessed since conspiracies are per definition secretive activities and as such remain secret if successful and conducted properly.

It is worth noting that the assessment of the prior probability also depends on the definition of "conspiracy theory" and on what counts as proper conspiracy and that particularists endorsing a broad definition accordingly have a higher assessment of the prior probability since their

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<sup>127</sup> cf. Dentith 2014, 95

<sup>128</sup> cf. Dentith 2014, 138

<sup>129</sup> Dentith 2014, 158

definition rules in most cases.<sup>130</sup> It is doubtful however if business meetings and surprise parties, which count as CTs under a broad definition, are sufficiently similar to terror attacks or government plots as to be able to derive anything about the probability of the latter from the probability of the former since these two extremes seem to be rather different in nature.

We might try to estimate the prior probability via inductive inference of past instances of occurred conspiracies that have eventually been exposed. Such inference would have to consider some number of confounding variables like the difference between societies of today and societies a few decades ago in terms of technology and media of communication and other factors that affect the likelihood of activity remaining secret. Some conspiracy skeptics might argue that the prior probability of large-scale conspiracies is relatively low since “so many” conspiracies occurred in the past, ie. since there exist so many WCTs, and since many of them occurred decades ago and our societies are radically different nowadays in the sense of it being more difficult to keep activities and communication secret. A charitable particularist might argue that the prior probability of large-scale conspiracies is relatively high given that “so many” conspiracies have occurred in the past and given the fact that it is reasonable to assume that the present is similar to the past. With respect to the Edward Snowden NSA revelations and WikiLeaks publications, Matthew Dentith argues the “evidence indicates that the independent likelihood that conspiracies occur is higher than we previously thought.”<sup>131</sup> David Coady likewise considers conspiracies to be common.<sup>132</sup> And Lee Basham also argues for a high prior probability of conspiracies occurring:

There is no denying that we live in a remarkably secretive, hierarchically organized civilization. The major bases of power—national governments and global corporate empires—combine enormous institutional, financial and technological resources with extensive mechanisms of secrecy, both preventative and punitive. Financial gain, political power and maniacal ego-amplification have always proved strong temptations for unaccountable authorities. Such a civilization is ripe of allegations of organized, society-wide manipulations and deceptions effecting most everyone’s life. It’s no surprise that such allegations are exceedingly common. On the face of things there is a serious *prior probability* of global conspiracy.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> cf. Dentith; Keeley 2018, 288

<sup>131</sup> Dentith 2014, 155

<sup>132</sup> cf. Ibid., 155

<sup>133</sup> Basham 2003, 95

Such an assessment is “a subjective judgement” and the conclusions of the assessment reached by different agents might vary significantly even if they take into account the same set of past occurrences due to other factors and attributions such as beliefs about the society one lives in.<sup>134</sup> And since our set of past occurrences of conspiracies is incomplete in the sense of excluding the unidentified number of successful and undetected conspiracies that cannot be taken into account, the significance of such assessments is questionable. However, it seems reasonable to take claims about conspiracy serious since conspiratorial behavior frequently occurred in the past even if we don’t know exactly how common it is.

## 6. Standard criticisms and other critiques of CTs

In the philosophical literature, primarily within the generalist literature, some epistemological critiques of CTs and conspiracy theorizing have been offered to argue that CTs, or at least a subclass of them, should be rejected *per se*. In the following, some of these critiques are briefly sketched out before demarcation criteria are discussed in section 7.

The criticisms usually levied against CTs turn out to be issues that are not unique to CTs but rather also impact and concern other kinds of theorizing and reasoning. As such these criticisms have been dismissed by particularists as grounds for a general rejection of CTs. Of course, some CTs will be faulty or the result of fallacious reasoning but, as particularists contend, the fault of some CTs or conspiracy theorists does not justify a rejection of the whole class of CTs. In this sense these criticisms have been dismissed by particularists insofar as a justification for a general rejection of CTs is concerned.

The criticisms discussed below concern falsifiability, epistemic vices, the overemphasis of dispositional aspects in explanations, psychological aspects including the paranoid style of thinking and faulty reasoning supposedly associated with conspiracy theorizing.

### 6.1 Evidence and Falsifiability

A common criticism of CTs is that they are selective with evidence and are resistant to falsification in the sense that they can accommodate any observation. And because it is usually irrational to believe in unfalsifiable theories it is asserted that belief in CTs is irrational.<sup>135</sup> But as

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<sup>134</sup> Dentith, 138

<sup>135</sup> Harris 2018, 243

described above it lies in the nature of, at least some, CTs that falsifying evidence, in the sense of fabricated evidence, is to be expected hence falsifiability is widely seen as an insufficient criterion in the case of CTs due to the object of investigation being vastly different compared to the natural sciences.<sup>136</sup> The issue with the criterion of falsifiability is that it might rule out genuine cases of conspiracy such as the Watergate scandal, since the investigations by the journalists Woodward and Bernstein met this criterion in early stages of the investigation.

Napolitano for example rejects the notion of “theory” in “conspiracy theory” and considers CTs as an irrational “way of holding a conspiratorial belief” which she defines as epistemically “self-insulated” and thus immune to falsification.<sup>137</sup> She then argues for the rejection of conspiracy beliefs in this specific sense since they are “not being adequately responsive to evidence” and thus unfalsifiable.<sup>138</sup> Such account however can be assessed to be concerned with only a subclass of CTs, or conspiracy beliefs in this case.

As will be discussed in section 7 there are problems associated with the limited falsifiability and resistance to refutation of CTs, but these issues are not issues of non-falsifiability *per se*.

## 6.2 Epistemic vices

In the branch of virtue epistemology, it is argued that conspiracy theorists typically exhibit certain epistemic vices, which are character traits that are assumed to inhibit rational investigation. The argument then is that conspiracy theorizing and CTs exhibit more epistemically vicious traits than their non-conspiratorial counterparts.<sup>139</sup> Conspiracy theorists usually know many details and facts about the target events of their held CTs and exhibit the epistemically virtuous trait of diligence and devotion to uncovering the truth, but it is held that the epistemically vicious traits in combination with the epistemically virtuous traits inhibit investigation. Among such epistemic vices are those of haste and inattentiveness, gullibility and closed-mindedness in the sense of “an unwillingness to earnestly engage with other perspectives.”<sup>140</sup> For example it is held that there is a disparity in how conspiracy theorists engage with evidence in that they apply more scrutiny to evidence disconfirming their theories than on evidence apparently supporting them.

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<sup>136</sup> cf. Dentith 2014, 135; cf. Keeley 1999, 121; Basham 2003, 96

<sup>137</sup> Napolitano 2022, 31

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 32

<sup>139</sup> Harris 2018, 242

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 242

However, since this is an empirical question and since this criticism only concerns a subclass of conspiracy theorizing and does not extend to CTs *per se* it is rejected by particularists.

### 6.3 The fundamental attribution error and dispositional explanations

Another criticism that goes back to Karl Popper and is echoed to some extent by Clarke and Mandlik is that CTs put too much emphasis on dispositional aspects and disregard situational aspects of explanation so that they unnecessarily attribute intent to the occurrence of historical events and attribute conspiracies for the explanation of events when there are none. Popper for example asserts that real life conspiracies often fail and rarely turn out as they are intended since such social phenomena are highly complex and have unintended consequences.<sup>141</sup> Popper asserted that what he called “the conspiracy theory of society” has “very little truth in it.”<sup>142</sup> And that conspiracy theorists over-emphasize dispositional factors such that they “will believe that institutions can be understood completely as the result of conscious design”.<sup>143</sup> But it is worth noting that Galbraith recently argued that Pigden fundamentally misinterpreted Popper’s critique of the *conspiracy theory of society* because what Popper had in mind with this concept differs significantly from what contemporary scholars mean when they use the term “conspiracy theory”.<sup>144</sup> Popper’s aim was not to show that CTs are generally false and that belief in them is naïve and irrational, his critique of the *conspiracy theory of society* rather aims at demonstrating what a good social science theory of society should encompass by contrasting it with types of social explanations he deems to be insufficient and reductive. The central point of the concept of the *conspiracy theory of society*, as introduced by Popper in the late 1940’s, is that “historical or sociological analysis based only on discovering intentions is inadequate to the task”, since a successful conspiracy still needs social explanations as plots hardly ever realize as planned, unintended consequences are frequent occurrences and since many social factors are involved.<sup>145</sup> In this sense Popper was not concerned with the epistemology of particular conspiracy theories but aimed to argue for a proper social-scientific methodology by highlighting the contrast to improper types of social explanations

Clarke, additional to his main critique that is discussed in the next section, explained the level to which conspiracy theorists cling and hold on to clearly unwarranted CTs with reference to

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<sup>141</sup> cf. Coady 2006, 14-15

<sup>142</sup> cf. Ibid., 13

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>144</sup> cf. Galbraith 2022, 255

<sup>145</sup> Galbraith 2022, 254

the fundamental attribution error.<sup>146</sup> In social psychology findings suggest that this effect, which basically states that humans typically overestimate dispositional factors and underestimate situational factors when judging and explaining behavior of others, is widespread. According to this explanation conspiracy theorists cling on to UCTs because they overestimate dispositional and intentional aspects in explaining historical events.

Mandlik in a similar manner considers CTs as “extremely problematic intentional explanations”, since they are “multi-agent intentional explanations of historical events” and require knowledge of the intentional states of multiple agents.<sup>147</sup>

Such line of reasoning is held to be insufficient to establish grounds for a general suspicion of CTs since it is not clear why such a prevalence of overemphasis of dispositional factors would be especially present in the realm of CTs as opposed to other kinds of historical or intentional explanations. Actually, Clarke backtracked on his initial evaluation of the fundamental attribution error, its pervasiveness and generalizability in a later paper but holds that the overall argument is still defensible if there are some other psychological factors explaining the motivation to hold onto theories when other people wouldn’t.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, such criticism also concerns conspiracy theorizing and not CTs themselves and is thus unable to establish grounds for a general rejection or suspicion of CTs.

#### **6.4 The paranoid style and the psychology of CTs**

Richard Hofstadter’s influential notion of the *paranoid style of thinking* in politics concerns a specific kind of conspiracy theorizing, which he classifies analogously to clinical paranoia and to artistic style as a paranoid mode of expression.<sup>149</sup> This analogy is not intended to attribute a psychiatric pathology but rather to highlight some parallels between paranoia and conspiracy theorizing Hofstadter identified. As opposed to the clinical paranoic the paranoid spokesman in politics does not consider himself to be at the center of the conspiracy, he rather identifies a culture or a way of life to be at the center but both, the paranoic and paranoid spokesman in politics, tend to be “overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, and apocalyptic in expression”.<sup>150</sup> He characterized the paranoid style as follows:

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<sup>146</sup> cf. Clarke 2000, 143

<sup>147</sup> Mandlik 2007, 209

<sup>148</sup> Steve Clarke in: Coady 2006, 130-132

<sup>149</sup> cf. Hofstadter 1964, 4

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 4

The central image is that of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life. One may object that there *are* conspiratorial acts in history, there is nothing paranoid about taking note of them. This is true. [...] The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but they regard a “vast” or “gigantic” conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent powers, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade.<sup>151</sup>

A person exhibiting the paranoid style thus tends to see conspiracies when there are none and “what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil” and the enemy is considered as “a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman” being “sinister ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury loving”, and shaping the course of history while profiting from misery.<sup>152</sup>

Conspiracy theory theorists like Hofstadter tend to adhere to a pejorative definition of “conspiracy theory”, which renders CTs as generally irrational, and view conspiracy theorizing generally through a conspiracist lens. In this sense warranted conspiracy theorizing is excluded and only unwarranted conspiracy theorizing in the sense of conspiracism is considered so that this analysis only concerns a subclass of conspiracy theorizing.

Somewhat related to the notion of the paranoid style and conspiracism, ie. the believe in CTs *sans* evidence, are arguments from the psychology of CTs. It seems like an uncontroversial fact that conspiracy theorists tend to have strong convictions that are not easily shook by counterevidence and are sometimes dogmatic defenders of their favorite CTs, which can be accounted for by psychological explanations. Among personality traits correlated with a higher likelihood for belief in CTs are interpersonal trust, paranoia, schizotypy, self-esteem and authoritarianism and among other mechanisms and biases are the proportionality bias, ie. the tendency to assume that “significant events require significant causes”, the confirmation bias, ie. the tendency to look for confirming evidence instead of looking for disconfirming evidence when considering a hypothesis, as well as the conjunction fallacy, being an error in probabilistic reasoning “whereby people overestimate the likelihood of co-occurring events.”<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, conspiracy theorizing is correlated with illusory pattern perception, which might affect perception of errant data, that is supposed to be “a central cognitive ingredient of beliefs in conspiracy

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 32

<sup>153</sup> Brotherton, French 2014, 238

theories and supernatural phenomena.”<sup>154</sup> Since there are many factors influencing belief in CTs psychologically and since it is assumed that most CTs are the result of such non-rational influences, it is held that some attitude of *prima facie* skepticism is justified.

Such line of argument is similar to the argument from epistemic vice and dispositional explanations since it focuses on the conspiracy theorists rather than on CTs *per se*. And for the same reasons such line of argumentation is dismissed by particularist since it is only concerned, due to the focus on studying false belief, with a subclass CTs and cannot be extended to the whole class. Furthermore, the psychological analysis as well as Hofstadter’s analysis of the paranoid style seem more fitting in describing conspiracism than conspiracy theorizing.

### 6.5 Epistemological flaws and faulty reasoning

CTs are widely held to be epistemologically flawed and to be the product of faulty reasoning. Apparent epistemological flaws such as non-falsifiability can be accounted for by referring to the nature of CTs that renders the rejection of counterevidence rational to some degree.

The individual judgement regarding the evaluation of particular CTs is, as highlighted in section 5.5, influenced by the assessment of the prior probability of how likely conspiracies are to occur which will vary between agents and influence their reasoning. But insofar as the reasoning itself is concerned UCTs do not seem to incorporate invalid forms of inferences but are rather based on false premises resulting from factors such as the assessment of prior probability or selectivity with evidence in the sense of rejecting valid sets of evidence.

Harris argued that a subclass of conspiracy theorizing, in the case of CTs rivalling some official account, involves a fallacious extension of probabilistic *modus tollens*: He builds his argument on Keeley’s notion of errant data that is used by conspiracy theorists to reject the official account of events. Harris focuses on unaccounted for errant data because “it is unclear that data ever contradict official accounts” since they “assert little about the world in the absence of background hypotheses” and since he regards unaccounted for errant data as more central to conspiracy theorizing.<sup>155</sup> His revised form of Keeley’s concept of unaccounted for errant data is “data for which the official story, but purportedly not the conspiracy theory, fail to account.”<sup>156</sup> Harris takes that there is something epistemically wrong with rejecting an official account with reference to unaccounted for errant data even if there are genuine data that are

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<sup>154</sup> van Prooijen et al. 2018, 332; cf. Harris 2018, 248

<sup>155</sup> Harris 2018, 247-248

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 2018, 248

errant relating to the official account, since such move involves an invalid form of modus tollens. In opposition to modus ponens, modus tollens has no probabilistic counterpart in the sense that: “If it is true that if  $p$ , then  $q$  is probable then, if  $p$  is true,  $q$  is indeed probable.”<sup>157</sup> This, however, does not work for modus tollens since it does not follow from ‘if  $p$  is true, it is enormously improbable that  $q$ ’ and the observation ‘ $q$ ’ that  $p$  is improbable.<sup>158</sup> He illustrates this with the example of a fair lottery because if a lottery is fair [ $p$ ] it is extremely improbable for any individual participant to win [ $q$ ] but it does not follow that when an individual wins the lottery that the lottery was probably unfair.<sup>159</sup> Harris argues analogously that improbable unaccounted for data with respect to the official account do not provide grounds for rejection of the official account, since it would be a mistake to reject the official account simply because it renders one’s observation improbable.<sup>160</sup> Applying this analysis to the real world example of an errant datum of the official explanation of the events of 9/11, namely the erroneous BBC reporting of the collapse of building 7, that could be seen in the background, twenty-six minutes before it actually collapsed, which could be accounted for by the CT as a mishap of the media being co-conspirators, he argues that this does not show that the official account is probably false.<sup>161</sup> The same holds, he argues, for sets of errant data instead of single datums since they don’t “tell against the official account in a fundamentally different way than a single errant datum does.”<sup>162</sup>

Kurtis Hagen on the other hand argues that Harris’ lottery example is misleading, that Harris “implicitly assumes, wrongly, that if evidence is not conclusive, or at least not very strong on its own, then it doesn’t count as evidence at all” and that it is not clear whether conspiracy theorists typically apply such kind of reasoning.<sup>163</sup> Regarding the latter he argues conspiracy theorizing may be superficially similar to the probabilistic modus tollens but that there are nuances and “although an argument form that is not valid cannot *establish* its conclusion, a form of reasoning similar to it, with the proper nuance applied, may legitimately provide *evidence* for it.”<sup>164</sup> He illustrates this point with reference to the invalid form of affirming the consequent: If  $p$  then  $q$ .  $q$ . Therefore  $p$ . According to Hagen much of scientific reasoning seems superficially to follow such an invalid form of reasoning when a scientist generates a hypothesis  $p$  and reasons that if  $p$  is true the result  $q$  should be observed, then devises an experiment producing

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<sup>157</sup> Harris 2018, 248

<sup>158</sup> cf. Harris 2018, 248

<sup>159</sup> cf. Ibid., 250

<sup>160</sup> cf. Ibid., 251

<sup>161</sup> cf. Ibid., 251

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 251

<sup>163</sup> Hagen 2022, 200

<sup>164</sup> Hagen 2022, 200

conditions  $p$  and observes result  $q$ .<sup>165</sup> The scientist however “does not conclude that  $p$  must be true”, recognizing the invalid form of inference but the experiment “is nevertheless *evidence* that her hypothesis,  $p$ , is true.”<sup>166</sup> And compiling evidence of such kind legitimately increases the scientist’s confidence in the hypothesis.<sup>167</sup> According to Hagen conspiracy theorizing is using something similar to probabilistic modus tollens in an analogous way.<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, considering the form of probabilistic modus tollens there are some instances in which a valid conclusion cannot be drawn but there are also cases in which such a conclusion can reasonably be drawn, for example:

[A] If Ted won the lottery he would probably not continue living in his car.

[B] He is still living in his car.

[C] Therefore, he probably didn’t win the lotter.<sup>169</sup>

For such an example the conjunction of A and B is legitimate evidence for C and “under some circumstances this kind of evidence is sufficient to reasonably support belief.”<sup>170</sup>

Regarding Harris’ lottery example Hagen argues it is misleading since in his version “it is not surprising that there was a winner” and “if there is a winner, it had to be somebody” so “there is really no cause for suspicion.”<sup>171</sup> He illustrates this point by introducing a slightly modified lottery examples closer in resemblance of conspiracy theorizing by involving not something merely improbable but suspicious:

Instead of some random person winning, let’s assume that a close relative of someone involved in selecting the winner won. That may legitimately raise some eyebrows. But suppose it happened again and again. At some point, sure, it is reasonable to conclude that the lotter is probably unfair.<sup>172</sup>

But Harris suggests that such “inference is never reasonable” no matter how often it is repeated since he stated that it would be a mistake to “reject the official account because it makes one’s observations improbable”.<sup>173</sup> Hagen hence concludes that errant data can constitute evidence

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<sup>165</sup> cf. Ibid., 200-201

<sup>166</sup> Hagen 2022, 201

<sup>167</sup> cf. Ibid., 201

<sup>168</sup> cf. Ibid., 201

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 201

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 201

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 201

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 201

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 201; Harris 2019, 251

that provides reasons to increase our assessment of the likelihood of the official account being wrong.<sup>174</sup>

## **7. Approaches toward demarcation – Clarke, Keeley, Dentith and Boudry**

Since generalist philosophers are concerned with providing reasons for the rejection of CTs, or at least some subclass of CTs, such accounts are useful to derive demarcation criteria even if all critiques fail to establish grounds for a general rejection of CTs.

In this section the approaches of Clarke, Keeley, Dentith and Boudry are discussed before being evaluated in the next section. Clarke's generalist critique of CTs centers on the assessment of CTs in terms of Lakatosian scientific research programs while Keeley emphasizes the issue of public trust associated with the increasing skepticism of public information that results from unwarranted conspiracy belief. Dentith on the other hand operates within a particularist framework and provides some criteria for the evaluation of CTs that warrant limited suspicion. Boudry argues for the demarcation criterion of attributing preternatural powers to the conspirators as CTs mature without substantiating positive evidence surfacing and defends what he terms "moderate generalism".

Before examining Clarke's approach, as well as the other approaches, the Lakatosian notion of scientific research programmes is discussed since Clarke's analysis rests on this framework.

### **7.1 Lakatosian scientific research programmes**

Imre Lakatos' work in the philosophy of science aimed at a reconciliation of both the Popperian and the Kuhnian view of the rationality of scientific progress. His methodology of scientific research programmes is concerned with the question of demarcation of science from pseudo- or non-science and the explanation of the rationality of theory-change in the scientific process. Historically, after justificationist and verificationist approaches to knowledge, which took knowledge to consist of proven propositions, collapsed emphasis was put on the falsifiability of propositions as a hallmark of being scientific. Since no proposition could be proven, the task of the scientist should be to rigorously test propositions via experiments to sift out the false propositions from the pool of propositions.

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<sup>174</sup> Hagen 2022, 203

The basic tenet of the Popperian approach of falsificationism states that a scientific theory is scientific only if it articulates possible observations that would falsify the theory. In this sense a theory is only scientific “if it is empirically falsifiable, that is if it is possible to specify observation statements, which would prove it wrong.”<sup>175</sup> A good theory is thus good science “if it is refutable, risky and problem-solving and has stood up to successive attempts at refutation. It must be highly falsifiable, well-tested but (thus far) unfalsified.”<sup>176</sup>

The Kuhnian approach, motivated by the argument that the history of science hardly resembles the Popperian methodology, regards theory-change in science as an irrational process.<sup>177</sup> Scientists tend to cling on to their theories even in the light of severe anomalies and falsifying evidence and the change of scientific paradigms is seen as a matter of taste rather than rationality.

In Lakatos’ approach falsifiability still plays a role in a modified form. He endorses what he terms *sophisticated falsificationism*, a kind of falsificationism with methodological constraints that is applied to a series of theories rather than to single theories in isolation and that he distinguished from *naïve falsificationism*.<sup>178</sup> For sophisticated falsificationists a theory is “acceptable” and “scientific” only if “it has excess empirical content over its predecessor (or rival), that is, only if it leads to the discovery of novel facts.”<sup>179</sup> An essential feature is thus the prediction of novel facts, as Lakatos puts it, the aspect of excess empirical content

can be analysed into two clauses: that the new theory has excess empirical content (‘acceptability1’) and that some of this excess content is verified (‘acceptability2’). The first clause can be checked instantly by a priori logical analysis; the second can be checked only empirically and this may take an indefinite time.<sup>180</sup>

For the naïve falsificationist on the other hand “any theory which can be interpreted as experimentally falsifiable, is ‘acceptable’ or ‘scientific’.”<sup>181</sup>

For the naïve falsificationist a theory is falsified by a conflicting observational statement while a theory is falsified for the sophisticated falsificationist if and only if

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<sup>175</sup> Musgrave, Pidgen 2021, 1

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>177</sup> cf. Musgrave, Pidgen 2021, 1

<sup>178</sup> cf. Lakatos 1978, 33

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 33

another theory T' has been proposed with the following characteristics: (1) T' has excess empirical content over T: that is, it predicts *novel* facts, that is, facts improbable in the light of, or even forbidden, by T; (2) T' explains the previous success of T, that is, all the unfuted content of T is included (within the limits of observational error) in the content of T'; and (3) some of the excess content of T' is corroborated.<sup>182</sup>

Such “sequence of falsifiable theories characterized by a shared *hard core* of central theses that are deemed irrefutable- or, at least, refutation-resistant” in combination with a set of auxiliary hypotheses constitute what Lakatos calls “research programs”.<sup>183</sup> The *hard core* of central theses is unfalsifiable in the senses that “scientists working within the program are typically (and rightly) reluctant to give up on the claims that constitute the hard core”, and because “the hard core theses *by themselves* are often devoid of empirical consequences.”<sup>184</sup> For this reason the set of auxiliary hypotheses are needed in conjunction with the hard core theses in order to derive empirical predictions as is the case with Newtonian mechanics which requires auxiliary hypotheses concerning “positions, masses and relative velocities of the heavenly bodies” in conjunction with the initial conditions and the three laws of mechanics in order to make predictions.<sup>185</sup> This conception is then in line with the Duhem-Quine thesis which states that a single experiment can never falsify a theory because theories can never be tested in isolation but only in conjunction with auxiliary hypotheses.<sup>186</sup>

A research programme is then judged to be either progressive or degenerating in terms of whether the succession of theories each have excess empirical content and predict novel facts that are borne out by observation.<sup>187</sup> It can easily be seen that anomalous and contradictory observations do not simply refute a theory within this framework but rather that a series of anomalies and contradictory observations are necessary and implies, in conjunction with the quality of predictions, that the research programme is probably degenerative. A degenerating research program is one that “either fails to predict novel facts at all, or makes novel predictions that are systematically falsified.”<sup>188</sup> Hence a sufficient amount of conflicting observations that accumulate into falsifying evidence are required to render a research programme degenerative

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<sup>182</sup> Lakatos 1978, 32

<sup>183</sup> Musgrave, Pidgen 2021, 1

<sup>184</sup> Musgrave, Pidgen 2021, 1

<sup>185</sup> Musgrave, Pidgen 2021, 1

<sup>186</sup> cf. Ibid., 1

<sup>187</sup> cf. Lakatos 1978, 33

<sup>188</sup> Musgrave, Pidgen 2021, 1

and provide reasons to reject the research programme but it is hard to specify when exactly the amount of evidence is sufficient.

Falsification on this account is a multiple relation between “competing theories, the original ‘empirical basis’, and the empirical growth resulting from the competition” and thus exhibits a *temporal dimension*.<sup>189</sup>

## 7.2 Approaches toward demarcation - Clarke’s approach

Steve Clarke elaborates on Keeley’s critique of UCTs and applies the Lakatosian framework to the evaluation of CTs. According to him CTs “often have the appearance of forming the core of what Lakatos referred to as “degenerating research programs”.<sup>190</sup> CTs take the appearance of forming the core of degenerative research programmes by protecting the core thesis, being a claim of conspiracy, by the modification of the protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses and initial conditions when encountering disconfirming evidence as to save the original core theory.<sup>191</sup> According to Lakatos research programmes, being sequences of theories, are to be evaluated in terms of corroborated novel predictions and on how they engage with new evidence. Clarke holds that CTs typically exhibit features of degenerating research programmes which justifies some degree of skepticism towards CTs or even dismissal of CTs generally.

The minimal conditions for the CTs’ hard core of explicit theoretical commitments to be assessed as either progressive or degenerative research program consists of 1) the “identification of a conspiratorial group” and 2) the specification of “at least one motive to explain those group’s conspiratorial activities”.<sup>192</sup> According to Clarke a hard core “has to be explicit enough that it becomes clear when alterations of initial conditions and auxiliary hypotheses in the protective belt will actually function to protect the hard core”.<sup>193</sup> Without a sufficiently explicit hard core, proponents of the theory cannot assess what evidence counts as confirmatory and the theory cannot be assessed in terms of a research programme being progressive or degenerative. Applied to the example of the CT about Elvis’ faked death that Clarke elaborates on, the hard core would be the identified group of Elvis and his relatives as conspirators and Elvis’ motive of wanting to fake his death to spend the rest of his life in peace and without the public recognition as a celebrity. Initial assumptions might be that Elvis received help in carrying out his

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<sup>189</sup> Lakatos 1978, 35

<sup>190</sup> Clarke 2002, 136

<sup>191</sup> cf. Ibid., 136

<sup>192</sup> Clarke 2007, 170

<sup>193</sup> Clarke 2007, 170

plans, had the means to achieve his end and that the truth was covered up by the helpers. Auxiliary hypotheses might be hypotheses about the trustworthiness of police and media reports. Clarke illustrates his critique with the example of the CT about Elvis Presley's alleged faked death and the case that conspiracy theorist Gail Brewer-Giorgio laid out in her book about this UCT. According to the official explanation Elvis Presley died at age 42 due to a heart condition that is explained with reference to his poor life-style.<sup>194</sup> The rival CT explains the events surrounding Elvis' death as a conspiracy to fake his own death orchestrated by Presley himself with the help of his relatives.<sup>195</sup> Since conspiracy theorists are usually very dedicated in uncovering the truth of their theories, this CT cites a ton of evidence to support its claims. Contrasted to the "meager evidential basis" of the official account of the event the CT accounts for more evidence than the official account exhibiting the virtue of explanatory power and of being a unifying explanation, since CTs "invariably seem to be based on more evidence than their immediate rival, the nonconspiratorial "received view"" because they explain all the received view accounts for plus data unaccounted for by the received view<sup>196</sup>:

The conspiratorial rival theory that Brewer-Giorgio mounts is rich in detail, explaining, inter alia, why Elvis's middle name is misspelled on his tombstone (Elvis was superstitious and wouldn't want his name correctly spelled on a tombstone when he was in fact alive), and why Elvis's casket was unusually heavy (it contained a wax dummy and air conditioning unit to stop the wax dummy from melting). Brewer-Giorgio can also explain away the apparent plausibility of the conventional explanation of Elvis's death. Given that Elvis wished to fake his death, it would have suited him to appear to be in poor health so as to add plausibility to his cover story.<sup>197</sup>

Clarke regards this as clear example of a degenerating research programme since if Elvis

really were [sic] alive now (more than 20 years after his supposed death) then we would reasonably expect to have some firm evidence of his activities at some time in the past two decades. The behavior of his relatives, who Brewer-Giorgio alleges are coconspirators and probably in continuing contact with Elvis, would also be expected to behave highly unusual in a number of ways. But no reliable evidence of

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<sup>194</sup> cf. Clarke 2002, 135

<sup>195</sup> cf. Ibid., 135

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 135

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 135

the Presley relatives attempting to contact Elvis after 1977, or inadvertently revealing their complicity in a conspiracy, is forthcoming.

So, since no positive evidence surfaced in the past decades since the event, which would be expected according to the CT and could even be considered to be predicted by the CT and since a rival theory in more progressive state is available, Clarke regards this example as paradigmatic of a CT, in the sense of a research programme, in state of degeneration. Another example of a CT in a degenerative state cited by Clarke is the controlled demolition/inside job UCT of the events of September 11, which he contrasts with the official al-Qaida theory that he assesses as progressive research programme.<sup>198</sup>

Regarding falsification and disconfirming evidence, it is stressed that the way CTs accommodate disconfirming evidence by modifying the auxiliary hypotheses and interpreting it as disinformation and cover-up story propagated by the conspirators is not simply *ad hoc*.<sup>199</sup> This allows conspiracy theorists to accommodate disconfirming evidence and even interpret this evidence as evidence in favor of the CT. But conspiracy theorists run into a problem if they simply modify the auxiliary hypothesis without supporting positive evidence and accommodate disconfirming evidence if they don't posit novel predictions/retrodictions that gain corroboration. The irrationality of a CT is in this view analyzed in terms of the development of the theory in response to falsifying evidence and its degree of degeneration in relation to novel predictions, retrodictions and corroborations. Clarke's argument is that CTs usually appear to be research programmes in state of degeneration and ought to be rejected in cases they rival other research programmes in progressive states with corroborated predictions and retrodictions.

Clarke points out that his critique mainly focuses on a class of conspiracy theorizing rather than on CTs in general. But his critique seems to extend more broadly to CTs that he understands in terms of research programmes, being a sequence of theories.

Clarke wants to provide justification for the dismissive attitude intellectuals display toward CTs by highlighting the epistemic flaws not of a class of CTs but of a class of conspiracy theorists. If most conspiracy theorists exhibit epistemic flaws, intellectuals will be justified in dismissing CTs with the phrase "That's just a conspiracy theory" since they can assume that the CT in question will most likely be flawed as well. In conjunction with the clinging onto degenerating research programmes by conspiracy theorists Clarke also levies critique on conspiracy theorists

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<sup>198</sup> cf. Clarke 2007, 168

<sup>199</sup> cf. Clarke 2002, 136

for exhibiting the psychological failure of the fundamental attribution error, which describes people's tendency to overemphasize dispositional factors and underestimate situational factors when judging the behavior of other people.<sup>200</sup>

But the fundamental attribution error is assumed to be widespread so that it is not clear why it is assumed to necessarily apply to CTs in a manner that is different to other kinds of intentional explanations and theories that would justify a dismissal of CTs or conspiracy theorizing in general. Also, in historical explanations there are sometimes no clear boundaries between dispositional and situational factors, it is contended. Because the fundamental attribution error is not a problem specific to conspiracy theorizing and because the cognitive failure or biases of some conspiracy theorists cannot justify a general rejection of conspiracy theorizing or CTs, this line of argumentation is rejected by particularists.

The first criterion of demarcation to be derived from Clarke's approach hence is: 1) *The state of progression/degeneration of the research program.*

### **7.3 Approaches toward demarcation –Keeley's approach**

Keeley, who coined the term *unwarranted conspiracy theory* (UCT), provided an argument from public trust against this subclass of CTs.

As mentioned in section 3.1 Keeley adheres to the broad particularist definition of CT and supplements it with additional clauses to define UCTs. These clauses include the aspect of a UCT 1) contrasting an official explanation of the event in question, the aspect of 2) nefarious intent to exclude conspiracies of goodness, the aspect of 3) tying together seemingly unrelated events, the aspect that 4) the truths behind the events in question are typically well guarded secrets even if the alleged conspirators are sometimes well-known public figures and 5) the use of errant data.<sup>201</sup>

He notes that these criteria are only approximately distinguishing epistemically problematic CTs and that CTs featuring these criteria are not necessarily unwarranted since examples of WCTs such as the Watergate scandal meet all criteria.

Keely also stresses that non-falsifiability is not a significant problem for CTs since the object of investigation is actively trying to avoid being investigated and that the criterion of

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<sup>200</sup> cf. Ibid., 144

<sup>201</sup> cf. Keeley 1999, 116-117

falsifiability is only reasonable in the natural sciences with neutral objects of investigation.<sup>202</sup> But the real problem results from the central tenet of CTs of being able to render disconfirming evidence, that is assumed to be part of the cover-up, as evidence in favor of the CT that takes a toll over time when multiple instances of falsification/disconfirmation cumulate. This is because every new piece of disconfirming evidence forces the conspiracy theorist to extend the circle of conspirators and co-conspirators as to accommodate that piece of evidence resulting in larger and larger conspiracies.<sup>203</sup>

The epistemic problems of UCTs, as Keeley sees it, consist of the hyper-skeptic attitude belief in mature CTs requires, which ultimately undermines our trust in public institutions as well as our processes of establishing epistemic warrant more generally as with the scientific process of knowledge production. “Mature” means that the CT has been around for a long time without positive evidence surfacing. The exact time limit may be hard to define and vary between instances of CTs but it seems safe to regard CTs as mature if they exist for several years or decades without positive confirmation. This ever-increasing skepticism required by mature CTs then undermines the established mechanisms of knowledge production and the possibility of assessing the epistemic warrant of any information at all.<sup>204</sup> As Keeley puts it:

It is this pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions entailed by some mature conspiracy theories which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted. It is not their lack of falsifiability per se, but the increasing amount of skepticism required to maintain faith in a conspiracy theory as time passes and the conspiracy is not uncovered in a convincing fashion. As the skepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes.<sup>205</sup>

Keeley illustrates his point with reference to the Holocaust and the UCT that the Holocaust “never occurred and is a fabrication of Jews and their sympathizers.”<sup>206</sup>

Robert Anton Wilson correctly notes that “a conspiracy that can deceive us about 6,000,000 deaths can deceive us about *anything*, and that it takes a great leap of faith for Holocaust Revisionists to believe World War II happened at all, or that Franklin Roosevelt did serve as President from 1933 to 1945, or that Marilyn Monroe was more ‘real’ than King Kong

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<sup>202</sup> cf. Keeley 1999, 121

<sup>203</sup> cf. Ibid., 122

<sup>204</sup> cf. Ibid., 123

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 123

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 123

or Donald Duck. In the process of holding onto a belief in an increasingly massive conspiracy behind more and more public events, we undermine the grounds for believing in anything. At some point, we shall be forced to recognize the unwarranted nature of the conspiracy theory if we are to be left with *any* warranted explanations and beliefs at all.<sup>207</sup>

Keeley's argument definitively has some merit to it but the emphasis on the inability to hold any warranted beliefs and explanations at all as result of belief in UCTs seems exaggerated. Holocaust revisionism for sure requires large amounts of skepticism and rejection of corroborated and warranted historical knowledge that is likely to spread outside the domain of the historical science and affect beliefs in other domains as well and motivates rejection or skepticism of "the media" or "science" in general. But to argue that it takes a "great leap of faith" for the revisionist to believe that Marilyn Monroe "was more 'real' than King Kong or Donald Duck" seems hyperbolic. The great leap of faith in the belief that World War II happened at all seems more convincing even though it is perfectly possible that a Holocaust revisionist "just" doubts and rejects the Holocaust and relativizes the crimes of the Nazis without doubting that the war has happened at all.

Nevertheless, the main thrust of the argument still holds. Belief in mature UCTs such as the Holocaust UCT, that has matured for more than seven decades and accumulated various instances of falsification that would have to be interpreted as part of a cover-up which requires the extension of the group of conspirators to larger and larger amounts, requires too much skepticism as is reasonable to hold.

Keeley similarly applies this to the UCT of the Oklahoma City Bombings. The group of conspirators initially consisted of agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF), which was located in the building, and their superiors. When media reports and the FBI investigation found no signs of a government conspiracy the conspiracy theorists extended the circle of conspirators as to accommodate this disconfirming evidence.<sup>208</sup> So, with time passing the group of conspirators is extended to more and more parts of the government and media. Despite other factors such as no surfaced positive evidence and more explanatory rival explanations, such increasing skepticism as result of falsifications and corresponding extensions of the group of conspirators significantly lowers the probability of a CT being true and eventually warrants the classification of the CT in question as unwarranted.

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<sup>207</sup> Robert Anton Wilson as cited in Keeley 1999, 123; Keeley 1999, 123

<sup>208</sup> cf. Keeley 1999, 122

The demarcation criterion to be derived from Keeley thus are 2) *maturity* and 3) *hyper-skepticism*, which are closely related in Keeley's argument.

#### 7.4 Approaches toward demarcation –Dentith's approach

Matthew Dentith, in his 2022 paper, undertook the task of working out some features of CTs that justify some suspicion and are applicable to the evaluation of CTs in terms of the merit of investigation, regarding for example the prioritization of resources, and in terms of assessing the likelihood of their warrant.

The first of the four features he discusses is Keeley's criterion of *maturity*. As discussed above this feature refers to the duration a CT persists without gaining warrant in the sense of positive evidence surfacing. A lot of CTs persist over long periods of time without "major breakthrough" despite thorough investigation, which "gives rise to the suspicion that perhaps there is not much substance to these theories".<sup>209</sup>

The second feature Dentith discusses are *recurrent conspiracy narratives*. This refers to the suspicion of theories because of the familiarity to similar theories that one already deems to be suspicious or unwarranted.<sup>210</sup> We treat such theories as suspicious because we have seen past instances of those that turned out to be unwarranted. Such theories are "new examples of mature conspiracy theories which have been repackaged or relabeled" and are considered suspicious via resemblance to an existing mature CT.<sup>211</sup> The example Dentith cites to illustrate this feature is the Sandy Hook mass shooting hoax UCT that has been discussed in section 4.1 which exemplifies a recurrent narrative about mass-shootings being staged by the government to push for stronger legislation.

The third feature is the feature of *fantastical conspiracy theories*, referring to some CTs that are "fantastical in the sense they are so counter our experience that no sensible person would believe" them.<sup>212</sup> Such theories include claims that are beyond what most people can accept as true and thus generate suspicions. Examples of this kind of feature is David Icke's infamous global UCT about interdimensional shapeshifting lizard people ruling the world behind the

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>210</sup> cf. Ibid., 5

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 5

scenes or the flat earth UCT about the disc-like shape of the earth that is hidden from the public.<sup>213</sup>

The fourth feature is *defectibility* referring to the problem of keeping conspiracies secret in the face of active investigation and the likelihood of leaks or whistleblowers. A CT is defectible if “the costs of defection are low and the rewards of defection are high” a theory thus exhibits defectibility “if the conspiracy it postulates is defectible.”<sup>214</sup> The problem of defectibility hence states that “if the benefit to a member of the conspiracy revealing the conspiracy is higher than the cost of defecting from it, then we should expect someone to at least to [sic] act as a whistleblower.”<sup>215</sup> Defectibility is somewhat related to maturity in the sense that a conspiracy “will suffer the problem of defectibility if the conspiracy in question remains highly defectible and yet no one defects from it.”, which then license suspicion.<sup>216</sup>

These features are not binaries but rather exist on a spectrum and are a matter of degrees. What duration of time justifies the label “mature” is somewhat vague; the same applies to what counts as fantastical, when a CT is highly defectible and in some sense also with regards to when a narrative is considered to be recurrent. These features nevertheless indicate epistemically problematic aspects and can guide evaluation in terms of the merit of investigation and warrant of believe in the theories in question.

Dentith distinguishes between weak (type I) and strong (type II) suspicions. He defines weak suspicions as follows: “If a claim has one of the aforementioned features, this can generate in epistemic agents a *limited* suspicion which justifies treating the claim as unwarranted.”<sup>217</sup> These justify a limited degree of skepticism but don’t justify a dismissal of CTs as being false.<sup>218</sup>

So weak/type I suspicions still demand the CT to be investigated in order to substantiate the suspicion, which is the role strong/type II suspicions play: “Upon investigation a claim with one of the aforementioned features generates in epistemic agents a strong suspicion that the claim is unwarranted or even false.”<sup>219</sup>

A CT can be unwarranted in two senses, either it has not yet gained warrant in the sense that the available evidence does not justify belief in the CT, or it is clearly false according to the

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<sup>213</sup> cf. Ibid., 5

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>218</sup> cf. Ibid., 7

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 9

available evidence.<sup>220</sup> According to Dentith weak/type I suspicions relate to the former sense and strong/type II suspicions relate to the latter sense of “unwarranted”.<sup>221</sup>

The criteria of demarcation to be derived from Dentith’s approach, additional to the criterion of maturity derived from Keeley, are thus the features of 4) *recurrent conspiracy narratives*, 5) *fantastical conspiracy theories* and 6) *defectibility*

## 7.5 Approaches toward demarcation –Boudry’s approach

Maarten Boudry identifies parallels between philosophy of science’s traditional demarcation problem and the problem of demarcating legitimate theorizing about conspiracies from epistemically unwarranted kinds of CTs and proposes a criterion of demarcation as rule of thumb. He defends, with what the terms “moderate generalism”, *prima facie* suspicion about a subclass of CTs and attempts to rescue the generalist intuition behind statements such as “That’s just a conspiracy theory” or “I’m not a conspiracy theorist but ...”.

When adopting a neutral and broad definition, he argues, generalism seems to be obviously false and “it is doubtful whether any sensible person would embrace such a construal of “generalism” after even minimal reflection”.<sup>222</sup> Since generalists and particularists agree that conspiracies do happen, the more interesting question is “whether the class of bad or unfounded CTs suffer from *general* epistemic defects, which go beyond the particulars of each individual theory”<sup>223</sup>: “Is there a general way to diagnose and spot bad CTs, or should we evaluate them on a purely case-by-case basis?”<sup>224</sup> Boudry argues that the distinction between particularists and generalists mirrors the traditional demarcation problem with generalists such as Karl Popper arguing that all pseudoscience share common characteristics and particularists such as Larry Laudan arguing that bad theories “come in all forms and shapes and that there are no short-cuts to evaluate and dismiss them as a class.”<sup>225</sup>

He describes the moderate versions particularism and generalism as follows:

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<sup>220</sup> cf. Ibid., 10

<sup>221</sup> cf. Ibid., 10

<sup>222</sup> Boudry 2022, 6

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>225</sup> Larry Laudan as cited in Boudry 2022, 6

A moderate particularist need not commit herself to the view that every CT is radically different from the next one and that no two CTs are alike. She may admit that there are *some* recurring patterns and tropes in the class of CTs, but warn against hasty generalizations and insist on evaluating each CT on its own merits. Conversely, a moderate generalist need not commit herself to the view that there is a single and perfectly general silver bullet to demolish all bad CTs. She may admit that we should be somewhat attentive to the particulars, but insist that at bottom virtually all bad CTs suffer from the same epistemic defects, and that if we spot the relevant symptoms, our suspicion will be justified.<sup>226</sup>

Boudry subscribes to the narrow and pejorative definition of CTs, which is basically the broad definition plus the clauses of un-officialness, ie. being in opposition to explanations of the same event that are endorsed by the epistemic authorities, and nefarious intent since this definition best approximates the colloquial use of the concept.

The demarcation criterion he proposes is somewhat similar to Clarke's and Keeley's approach insofar as a temporal dimension is introduced and the accommodation of counterevidence is concerned in the evaluation. It also relates to the criterion of *defectibility* that has been discussed in the previous section.

His criterion is that of "preternaturally intelligent and powerful conspirators", meaning that at some point the attribution of preternatural intelligence and power to the conspirators is necessary to save the CT from refutation in the face of accumulating counterevidence.<sup>227</sup> Like Keeley's argument of ever-increasing skepticism that belief in *mature* CTs requires, Boudry takes issue with the attribution of almost god-like powers to the alleged conspirators that is required to sustain belief in mature CTs in the face of increasing levels of counterevidence. At this point "the realm of unfounded CTs" is entered and the CT "deserves *prima facie* suspicion and is most likely false."<sup>228</sup>

He identifies further features that are related to his criterion and contribute to the "epistemic defects" of CTs. Firstly, he invokes the asymmetry of causes and effects in the natural sciences as described by David Lewis' analysis of causation. The deep asymmetry between causes and effects consists in the fact that "effects almost always overdetermine their causes, in the sense that a single past event "radiates" into the future, leaving multiple and widespread effects, all

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 22; 7

bearing the fingerprints of the originating cause.”<sup>229</sup> As David Lewis put it: “Extreme overdetermination of earlier affairs by later ones [...] may well be more or less universal at a world like ours”, while the opposite, ie. overdetermination of later affairs by earlier affairs, as for example death by a firing squad, is relatively rare.<sup>230</sup> This asymmetry of causes and effects is exploited by all historical science which gives them a huge advantage because “with diligent investigation, it is possible to reconstruct even very distant causes, using only the smallest fraction of subsequent effects.”<sup>231</sup>

Carol Cleland built on Lewis’ analysis and applied it to the difficulty of committing a perfect crime, which includes removing all effects of the actions committed that could be traced:

Footprints, fingerprints, particles of skin, disturbed dust, and light waves radiating outward into space must be eliminated. Moreover, it isn’t enough to eliminate just a few of these traces. Anything you miss might be discovered by a Sherlock Holmes and used to convict you. Finally, each trace must be independently erased. You cannot eliminate footprints by removing particles of skin or, for that matter, one footprint by removing a different one.<sup>232</sup>

Applying this analysis to CTs it is easy to see that a successful cover-up story in the sense of eliminating all traces would be even harder considering a conspiracy is per definition consisting of multiple agents instead of one agent as is the case with the perfect crime scenario.

Boudry notes that the most powerful institutions and organizations in recent history “have failed to keep lid on some very embarrassing conspiracies, despite their best efforts of concealment.”<sup>233</sup> It follows from the asymmetry principle that “the larger and more complicated the conspiracy, and the more stages of preparation and execution are required, the more opportunities for investigators seeking to unveil it.”<sup>234</sup>

Considering 9/11 inside job/controlled demolition UCTs he notes that there is a multitude of evidence for the official explanation, ie. the al-Qaida theory, whereas there is, decades later, no single piece of positive evidence for the inside job UCT, despite thousands of motivated and dedicated people that are trying to find it.<sup>235</sup> This is likely because most un-official CTs tend to focus on identifying apparent contradictions or missing pieces in the official explanation, in the sense of Keeley’s errant data, instead of formulating a positive theory pinning down a group of

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 8

<sup>230</sup> Lewis 1979, 474; cf. Boudry 2022, 8

<sup>231</sup> Boudry 2022, 8

<sup>232</sup> Carroll Cleland as cited in Boudry 2022, 8

<sup>233</sup> Boudry 2022, 9

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>235</sup> cf. Ibid., 9

conspirators and their motives. Clarke argued in relation to the influence of the internet on the development and propagation of CTs, that the internet has retarded the development of CTs contrasted to the very detailed conspiratorial explanations before the era of the internet.<sup>236</sup> For reasons of external critique from conspiracy theory skeptics as well as internal critique from other conspiracy theorists with rival explanations of the same event they are reluctant in making any positive claims and committing to a specific variant of the theory but rather stick to emphasizing apparent contradictions in the official explanation.<sup>237</sup>

Boudry applies the asymmetry principle to the dictum that absence of evidence does not indicate evidence of absence, which is not necessarily correct from a Bayesian point of view:

Absence of evidence does constitute evidence of absence when the prior likelihood of finding such evidence (given the hypothesis under investigation) is high, in conformance with Bayes' theorem. The reason why the missing evidence of controlled demolition undermines the "inside job" hypothesis is that the asymmetry criterion gives us a very strong reason to expect such evidence, conditional on the actual occurrence of controlled demolition.<sup>238</sup>

So, the asymmetry criterion implies that in relation to the complexity and size of a conspiracy as well as the temporal dimension, the likelihood of finding positive evidence is increasing.

Concerning the temporal dimension, he notes that entertaining multiple possibilities that may include CTs can be rational in the immediate aftermath of an event or early stages of investigation and the dictum of absence of evidence may be true in the early stages since the conspirators either covered their tracks successfully or no one has searched or found the evidence yet.<sup>239</sup> But as time wears on "the opportunities for finding positive evidence multiply and the probability of *not* finding any such evidence, under the assumption of a conspiracy, dwindles."<sup>240</sup>

Boudry then links his demarcation criterion of preternaturally powerful and intelligent conspirators to a dilemma and vicious regress resulting of the asymmetry principle and the failure to find positive evidence:

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<sup>236</sup> cf. Clarke 2007, 176

<sup>237</sup> cf. Clarke 2007, 176

<sup>238</sup> Boudry 2022, 11

<sup>239</sup> cf. Ibid., 12

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 12

As the investigation proceeds and yet fails to yield evidence for a conspiracy, the principle of asymmetry leads us into a dilemma. Either we accept that, given the hypothesis of a genuine conspiracy, an honest and diligent investigation would have discovered positive evidence by now, and hence absence of evidence indeed translates to evidence of absence; or alternatively, we conclude that there has *not* been a diligent and honest investigation because the investigators were themselves involved in the cover-up. However, this would imply an even larger conspiracy than we initially assumed, which – by the principle of asymmetry – would have radiated even more effects for others to uncover. The fact that we do not find that evidence requires us to posit an even larger conspiracy, and so on. In other words, the principle of asymmetry leads to a vicious regress, which requires us to (1) attribute ever more intelligence and power to the conspirators and (2) keep widening the circle of presumed conspirators.<sup>241</sup>

This way even CTs that started small in scale end up vast and with the attribution of almost god-like powers as they mature without the surfacing of positive evidence. Boudry stresses that this argument also rests on the openness of the society in question because it is comparatively easier in a closed and authoritarian society to get away with performing large plots and keeping them secret than it is in open and liberal societies with freedom of expression and the free press.<sup>242</sup> He furthermore argues that the cost of defection is expected to be lower and the possible reward of defection is expected to be higher in open societies and that absence of evidence is therefore “more informative” in open societies.<sup>243</sup> This holds even without “the chauvinistic assumption that politicians in ‘our’ liberal and democratic societies are less inclined to engage in conspiracies because they supposedly abide by higher moral standards; it suffices that in closed and autocratic societies they can just get away with it more often.”<sup>244</sup>

Drawing on an analogy for irrational belief systems Boudry compares CTs to epistemic black holes “into which unwary truth-seekers may fall, never to escape again.”<sup>245</sup> This is because the ability to assimilate absence of evidence and even counterevidence cannot be regarded as *ad hoc*, it is a kind of self-sealing logic baked into the epistemic structure of CTs.<sup>246</sup> Once one is “prepared to ascribe preternatural shrewdness and power to the conspirators in your CT, no possible evidence can shake you out of your conviction.”<sup>247</sup> Due to this “warped epistemology,

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 12-13

<sup>242</sup> cf. Ibid., 13

<sup>243</sup> cf. Ibid., 13

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>246</sup> cf. Ibid., 15

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 15

CTs can persist in the teeth of any evidence or counterevidence.”<sup>248</sup> For these reasons Boudry sees the pejorative connotation of the concept of “CTs” as justified.

Additionally, Boudry presents a “general recipe” for constructing a CT for any given event and argues that CTs are radically underdetermined in the sense that the single steps, for example “the culprits, the plot and the mechanisms”, are “partly arbitrary and can be substituted for one another” because of the vagueness of CTs.<sup>249</sup> If only apparent contradictions and missing links in the official explanation are pointed out every conspiratorial hypothesis fits the data equally well.<sup>250</sup> In this sense it is possible “to construct multiple CTs around any given historical event” and since CTs are “psychologically appealing” it is hardly surprising that “every major historical event will spawn multiple CTs, *even if* no actual conspiracy has occurred.”<sup>251</sup> He illustrates this argument with the common “false flag operation” CTs that spawn around mass shooting events such as the Sandy Hook shooting.<sup>252</sup>

In this sense Boudry argues that *prima facie suspicion* is justified if one encounters an unofficial conspiratorial explanation after a recent historical event because the odds are high that the CT will be unfounded.<sup>253</sup> He accounts for this in Bayesian terms:

If  $C_x$  indicates that there is an unacknowledged conspiracy behind an event  $X$  and  $CT_x$  means that event  $X$  gives rise to popular conspiracy theories, then  $P(C_x|CT_x)$  is the probability that there is an actual unacknowledged conspiracy behind  $X$  given that many people are alleging a conspiracy, while  $P(CT_x|C_x)$  is the likelihood that an actual conspiracy will give rise to allegations of conspiracy. Because no historical event is immune to CTs and because many people are psychologically disposed to conspiratorial explanations, the likelihoods  $P(CT_x/C_x)$  and  $P(CT_x/\neg C_x)$  will both be very high. In other words, even if there is no actual conspiracy, it is still very likely that there will be persistent allegations of conspiracy. Following Bayes’ formula,  $P(C_x|CT_x) = P(CT_x|C_x)P(C_x)/P(CT_x)$ . In other words, whatever we think of the prior probability of an actual conspiracy behind an event  $X$ , the mere fact that there are certain persistent CTs around the event has hardly any probative value. *It always happens*. Moreover, there will typically be multiple and contradictory CTs, implicating different culprits and involving different plots. Those who are inclined to do so will never fail to come up with some CT regardless of what happened.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>250</sup> cf. Ibid., 18

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>252</sup> cf. Ibid., 19

<sup>253</sup> cf. Ibid., 20

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 20

This means that independent of the prior probability, which can hardly be assessed in the case of CTs since we only know, per definition, about the unsuccessful conspiracies, when one is encountered with a CT after a historical event the likelihood of a conspiracy having occurred is unaffected by the fact that multiple CTs are existing about the event since this always happens. And since this always happens Boudry argues that *prima facie* suspicion about CTs, in his terminology in the sense of unofficial and malevolent ones, is justified.

He does not specify what “*prima facie* suspicion” actually entails but it seems reasonably to interpret it as advising for caution and agnosticism about CTs instead of rejection without investigation since his criterion for demarcating reasonable hypothesizing about conspiracies draws on the temporal aspect of maturity in combination with the attribution of preternatural powers and hence requires some amount of investigation.

So, the principle of causal asymmetry, leading us to expect that future effects are overdetermined by their earlier causes and the fact that CTs tend to be underdetermined by evidence create a paradoxical situation since we should expect an abundance of possible traceable evidence in the case of conspiracies even though conspirators are usually actively trying to avoid detection. If the conspiracy theorist is prepared to attribute preternatural powers to the conspirators as the CT matures and no positive evidence surfaces, no evidence can shake his conviction and he is trapped in an epistemic black hole. Boudry also relates his concept of epistemic black holes to the concept of conspiracism, ie. the belief in CTs for other reasons than good arguments or evidence.<sup>255</sup>

The demarcation criterion Boudry provides is thus 7) *the attribution of preternatural powers*.

## 8. List of demarcation criteria - Discussion

Although Clarke’s and Boudry’s criteria are intended as criteria for a general rejection of CTs, or at least a subclass of them in Boudry’s case, they don’t imply that a CT is necessarily false if it exhibits the feature in question, they rather indicate that the CT is unlikely to be true and ought to be rejected if a better rival explanation exists. In this sense I see these features as indicating the probability of the warrant of belief in a CT; although the identification of one of those features in a CT allows an evaluation of the likelihood of it being true, it does not tell us that it must be false with certainty. Even if a CT exhibiting one or more of these features appears

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<sup>255</sup> cf. Ibid., 15

to be incredibly unlikely it is technically still possible to be true: A CT may be true even if it features fantastical explanations or even if it appears to be at the core a degenerating research programme. But the odds are very low.

The criteria of demarcation derived in the last section can now be put in conjunction as to constitute a list of demarcation criteria that may not be necessary and sufficient but provide a useful tool for evaluating CTs. If a CT exhibits one or more of these criteria the probability of it being unwarranted in the sense of being false and no conspiracy having occurred should be estimated as high. If a CT exhibits all those features, it is very likely to be false but even this instance would not exclude the possibility of it being true.

The following primary criteria drastically reduce the likelihood of a CT being warranted:

- *The state of progression/degeneration of the research program*: A CT can be assessed to be at the core a degenerative research program.
- *Maturity*: A CT persists over years without positive evidence surfacing.
- *Hyper-Skepticism*: Sustained belief in a mature CT in the face of disconfirming evidence requires an attitude of hyper-skepticism of public data as the scope of conspirators is extended.
- *Recurrent conspiracy narratives*: A CT features a recurrent narrative that we are familiar with from other theories that turned out to be false.
- *Fantastical conspiracy theories*: A CT involves extraordinary claims that go against the evidence and are so fantastical that they “go beyond what most people can accept as true.”
- *Defectibility*: A mature CT is highly defectible, in the sense of low cost and high reward of defection, but there exists no positive evidence in the form of leaks or whistleblower testimony. Defectibility is thus related to *maturity*.
- *Attribution of preternatural powers to the conspirators*: Sustained belief in a mature CT in the face of disconfirming evidence requires attribution of preternatural powers to the conspirators.

These additional secondary criteria slightly reduce the likelihood of a CT being warranted:

- *Scope*: A conspiracy that is large in scope is more likely to produce leaks or whistle-blowers than a conspiracy that is small. The scope of a CT relates to its *defectibility*.
- *Domain*: A CT in the domain of politics is *a priori* more plausible than a CT in the domain of medicine/science since the checks and balances in the latter domain tend to be more reliable.
- *Openness*: The (belief about the) openness of the society in question influences the prior probability of a conspiracy being successful and kept secret and thus influences the likelihood of a CT being true.

Additional to the criteria derived from the literature *domain*, *openness* and *scope* were added, with the latter being related to *defectibility* and *maturity*, drawing on Michael Barkun's distinction between event conspiracies, systemic conspiracies and super conspiracies.<sup>256</sup> A mature CT then gets more improbable the larger its scope, in the sense of high defection in contrast to an event CT that is small in scope. *A priori* a larger scope also indicates more evidence produced that has to be covered up and thus decreases the likelihood of the CT, in the case of absent positive evidence, in accordance with the principle of asymmetry of causes and effects.

The *domain* of the CT is somewhat indicative of its plausibility regarding the checks and balances in place and reliability of knowledge production mechanisms. This distinction between politically related and science related CTs is motivated by the amount of UCTs concerning the domain of science and medicine such as vaccination UCTs or climate change hoax UCTs. The distinction between the domain of politics and science then implies some difference in the prior probability.

The *openness* of a society indicates the prior probability of conspiracies. It is reasonable to assume that it is easier to get away with conspiracies in closed and authoritarian society in contrast to open and liberal societies. And if the risk of getting caught is higher in open societies this will likely affect the readiness of potential conspirators to engage in conspiracy. Openness only serves as a rough heuristic and it is not possible to assess the exact degree of openness in relation to conspiracies since we know, per definition, only about conspiracies that failed to stay secret.

It is worth noting that some of these criteria are overlapping in what they consider epistemically problematic traits of CTs that indicate them being unwarranted. For example, *maturity* as

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<sup>256</sup> cf. Barkun 2003, 6

temporal dimension is featured in Keeley's criterion of *hyper-skepticism* as well as in Clarke's criterion of *degenerating research programmes*, Boudry's criterion of *attributing preternatural powers to the conspirators* and Dentith's approach. *Defectibility* in the sense of the unlikelihood of CTs with high rewards and low cost for defection in combination with no positive evidence supporting a mature CT is featured in Boudry's and Dentith's approach. And the criteria of *fantastical conspiracy theories* and *attribution of preternatural powers to the conspirators* can also be seen to have some overlap.

The criteria are related in multiple ways, *defectibility* for example is related with *maturity* and *maturity* is also related to *hyper-skepticism*, the *attribution of preternatural powers* and to the assessment in terms of *degenerative research programs*. Also, some of the secondary criteria are interrelated with some of the primary criteria. *Openness* and *scope* for example are related with *defectibility* because a more open society implies lower risk and higher rewards for defection as opposed to more closed and authoritarian societies.

## **9. List of demarcation criteria – Evaluation: Application to paradigmatic examples**

To test the applicability of the demarcation criteria the UCTs and WCTs presented in section 4 are discussed in regard to how well they fit the criteria.

Consider for example the UCT about the Sandy Hook school shooting: The CT can be regarded as *mature* since 10 years have passed since then, and because no positive evidence exists thus far, belief in this CT would require a huge degree of *skepticism* towards (parts of the) the government, that is accused as the culprit staging the events, as well as the media and the executive forces handling the investigation. The number of conspirators and co-conspirators also suggests a quite high degree of *defectibility*. For these reasons sustained belief in this CT requires *attribution of huge powers* to the conspirators for keeping their actions secret so long. Because of the lack of positive evidence and failed predictions it can be assessed as *degenerating research programme*. The CT also features a prominent *recurrent narrative* asserting the staging of mass-shooting events in order to push for and justify restrictive gun legislation. Furthermore, the claims made by the CT are quite *fantastical*, since they allege that parents of the shooting-victims who mourn the loss of their children are, in reality, crisis actors carrying out an elaborate script. The staging of such an event without positive evidence surfacing implies quite a large *scope*. The event took place in a relatively open society and the domain is political, so *openness* and *domain* are also met.

Regarding the criteria the Sandy Hook UCT thus fits all primary as well as secondary criteria more or less well.

Also consider the controlled demolition UCT about the events of 9/11: According to this CT the collapse of the twin towers and WTC building 7 are the result not of the impact and fires of the plane crashes but of a controlled demolition orchestrated by parts of the government and other nefarious agents.

This UCT fits the criterion of *maturity*, since more than two decades have passed without positive evidence surfacing and of *degenerative research programmes* because the theory lacks predictive and explanatory power compared to the official Al-Qaeda theory. Related to this the criterion of *hyper-skepticism* is also present because of the large *scope* of conspirators involved, consider for example the time and effort and number of agents required to plant explosives in three huge and frequented buildings without being noticed, and the amount of evidence that has to be explained away by conspiracy theorists resulting in large distrust of public information. In relation to *scope* and *maturity* the level of *defectibility* can also reasonably be assessed to be very high. *Attribution of preternaturally powerful conspirators* is also present and required to some degree to maintain belief in the CT in the face of the counterevidence. The event took place in a relatively open society and the domain of the CT is the domain of politics, so *openness* and *domain* met as well.

The only criteria not met by the controlled demolition UCT are the criteria of *recurrent conspiracy narratives*, because there are no other CTs sufficiently similar in narrative and *fantastical conspiracy theories*, since most claims made by the classic controlled demolition CT are not beyond possibility and not as outlandish to count as fantastical. Among the many 9/11 CTs there are also no-plane theories asserting that there were no planes and hijackers and that the appearance of planes crashing into the buildings was caused by holograms covering the impact of missiles.<sup>257</sup> Such claims could reasonably be considered as fantastical compared to the more classic controlled demolition theory claims.

Consider furthermore the Oklahoma City bombing UCT, which attributes the responsibility for the bombing and the alleged subsequent cover-up to parts of the government, ie. the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF), the FBI and parts of the media.

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<sup>257</sup> See the wikipedia article on 9/11 conspiracy theories under section: “no-planes theory” - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/9/11\\_conspiracy\\_theories](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/9/11_conspiracy_theories)

Although only one event is concerned the *scope* of the alleged conspiracy is quite large. Because more than 20 years have passed since then and no positive evidence for any alternative explanation of the event exists it also fits *maturity*. *Skepticism* is present to some degree, although not in the sense of all-encompassing doubt and the theory can reasonably be assessed as *research programme* in the state of degeneration. The probability of *defection* is relatively high in relation to the scope of the alleged conspiracy and the timespan. Assuming a conspiracy occurred and remained hidden until today the conspirators must be extraordinary powerful and successful for that to be the case, so the criterion of *attribution of preternaturally powerful conspirators* is also met to some degree as well.

The UCT does not feature a *recurrent conspiracy narrative* and does not include any claims that can be considered *fantastical*. Since the event occurred in a relatively *open* society and in the *domain* of the political the criteria of *openness* and *domain* are also met. So, this UCT meets five of the primary criteria and all of the secondary criteria.

The examples of the Illuminati and new-world-order (NWO) UCTs easily fit all primary criteria: Such super-conspiracies are huge in *scope*, are very *mature* and clear cases of *degenerative research programmes*. The trope that some secret group is ruling the world behind the scenes and is shaping the course of world history is clearly a *recurrent conspiracy narrative* and belief in such UCT requires *hyper-skepticism*. Such UCT furthermore fits the criterion of the *attribution of preternatural powers* to the conspirators, is quite *fantastical* and highly *defectible*. In terms of secondary criteria *scope*, *domain* and *openness* are all met, since the false CT is large in *scope*, concerns the *domain* of the political, in which conspiracies are assumed to be more probable and as far as events of modern times are concerned also *openness*.

Consider, in contrast, some of the examples of WCTs in relation to the demarcation criteria. In the case of the Watergate scandal one event as well as subsequent attempts at a cover-up are concerned so the *scope* of the CT is quite small. The CT also cannot be assessed as *mature* since positive evidence surfaced and the culprits have been identified, sentenced and President Nixon had to resign almost two years after the events occurred. The CT constitutes a *progressive research programme* that has borne out successful predictions hence there is no *skepticism* involved in believing this theory. The events took place in an *open* society but the fact that it has been exposed relatively quickly reinforces the belief that it is comparatively harder to get away with conspiracies in open societies. The CT neither makes *fantastical* claims nor does it require the conspirators to be extraordinary *powerful* and intelligent. One might argue that the CT

represents a *recurrent narrative* insofar as spying on the opposed political party was involved but the narrative is quite unspecific and is not the kind of narrative that frequently sparks UCTs. This WCT hence does only meet the secondary criteria of *openness* and *domain*.

Consider the case of the Moscow show trials WCT: This CT now constitutes a substantiated and officially endorsed explanation and can thus be assessed as *progressive research programme*. No *hyper-skepticism* is required for belief in this CT, and neither is the *attribution of preternatural powers*. The conspiracy cannot be regarded as highly *defectible* since it took place in a *closed* and authoritarian society. The criteria of *recurrent conspiracy narratives* and *fantastical conspiracy theories* are not met. The *scope* of the conspiracy was quite small “only” involving Stalin and his cronies since the UK’s and USA’s initial support of the cover-up resulted of insufficient knowledge. The conspiracy may be regarded as *mature* but since positive evidence surfaced and an admission occurred this criterion is hardly met.

This WCT hence does hardly meet any criteria, solely *domain* is met. And the criterion of *domain* relating to the checks and balances in place that justify a distinction in likelihood rests on the openness of the society and since this conspiracy took place in a relatively closed and authoritarian society the criterion of domain can hardly be assessed to be met.

The Edward Snowden NSA espionage scandal WCT is a *progressive research programme*, it likewise requires no *hyper-skepticism*, since it is an substantiated and officially accepted explanation, or *attribution of preternaturally powerful conspirators* to believe in this theory. It was a quite *defectible* conspiracy due to its *scope* which arguably led to the revelation by leaks of Edward Snowden. But the cost of defection has also been quite high as illustrated by the fact that Snowden had to flee the country, but defection also entailed some reward. This WCT cannot be considered *mature* since positive evidence eventually came forward. To some extent this CT might be considered as exemplifying a *recurrent conspiracy narrative* although the assertion that intelligence agencies unlawfully engage in espionage is kind of vague. The facts about the NSA’s activities could also be considered to be quite *fantastical* in the sense that such operation and the extent was highly unexpected before it was revealed. The conspiracy took place in a relatively *open* society and in the *domain* of politics.

This WCT only fits the secondary criterion of *openness* since such operation is more unlikely to occur in an open society in contrast to a closed society and to some extent the primary criteria of *fantastical conspiracy theories* and of being a *recurrent conspiracy narrative*. But regarding the openness one might argue that this was the precise reason defection happened and the

conspiracy was eventually revealed. However, this case illustrates that some WCTs may very well feature fantastical claims or recurrent narratives and still turn out to be true, but as the criteria suggest the likelihood gets lower the more of the criteria are met.

The case of the MKUltra WCT doesn't meet the *degenerative research programme* criterion since it led to a myriad of borne out predictions and explanations. It also does not require *hyper-skepticism* since it is an officially endorsed and proven explanation of events, and it does not require attribution of *preternatural power and intelligence* to the conspirators to sustain belief. The *scope* of the theory was quite large considering the timespan the project ran and the conspiracy can also be considered highly *defectible*. It does not feature a *recurrent conspiracy narrative* but arguably features *fantastical* claims as such activities must have seemed fantastical prior to revelation. It took place in a relatively *open* society, although amid the cold war, and in the *domain* of politics.

This WCT only meets the criterion of *fantastical conspiracy theories*, but it likewise illustrates that a CT need not necessarily be false solely because it features claims that might seem fantastical. On the other hand, it reinforces the belief that in open societies conspiracies get exposed sooner or later.

This analysis shows, in accordance with the expectation, that the paradigmatic examples of UCTs fit most of the suggested criteria of demarcation while the WCTs hardly meet any criteria.

## 10. On Conspiracy theory theory

Blanket dismissal of CTs without investigation lacks intellectual rigor and cannot, in this author's view, be justified because a demarcation, when adhering to the broad definition of "conspiracy theory", of unwarranted CTs from legitimate hypothesizing about conspiracies, ie. warranted CTs is not possible on *a priori* grounds. A demarcation can only be achieved on *a posteriori* grounds, which requires at least some amount of investigation, and even then, there is no clear line of demarcation.

So, if the *generalist* notion of *prima facie suspicion* entails a general rejection of CTs without any investigation at all then it is an untenable view. But it is doubtful if *generalists* actually endorse such blanket dismissal of theories, a more charitable interpretation would be the advice of caution for the reason of general epistemic errors associated with CTs and the rejection of CTs as a matter of inference to the best explanation if better rival theories are available. Also,

it is worth noting that generalists usually adhere to narrower definitions of CTs so they should be considered to be only concerned with a subclass of CTs.

Strict *particularism* may run afoul of missing the recurring patterns UCTs exhibit and risks underestimating problematic forms of conspiracy belief. But the general notion of investigating each individual CT on its own merits is, in this author's view, crucial since no demarcation is possible on *a priori* grounds and there is no clear line of demarcation even *a posteriori*.

In this author's view, we should be generalists about UCTs but *particularists* about CTs, but since there is no clear line of demarcation some form of *particularism* is the best way to go if the aim is to properly engage with CTs in the sense of separating the wheat from the chaff and determining whether a CT is a UCT. *Generalism* risks missing some proper conspiratorial behavior, ie warranted CTs, by a too broad skepticism and the false labeling of a WCT as UCT, so that the conspiracy might have been exposed earlier if the general tendency of engagement were less skeptical.<sup>258</sup>

The problem of *generalism* then is that *generalism* is not able to properly demarcate UCTs from the whole class of CTs with sufficient certainty so that warranted CTs might go unnoticed and may get exposed later as if the general public reaction towards CTs was a more charitable and serious one, which is a concern emphasized by *particularists*.<sup>259</sup> Real risks are associated with conspiracies as Dentith and Keeley point out: "The existence of conspiracies does not just threaten our trust in influential institutions that make up our societies, they can also pose a direct threat to members of the public."<sup>260</sup> But there are also real risks associated with people believing in unwarranted and false CTs and the aforementioned aspects equally apply here: Such unwarranted beliefs can threaten our trust in public institutions and democracy itself and pose a direct threat to members of the public as is exemplified with UCTs about vaccinations that can have fatal consequences especially during epidemics or UCTs about rigged elections as is exemplified with the January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol attack from 2021. The form of particularism proposed in this thesis is intended to take the concerns about unnoticed conspiracies and exaggerated conspiracy theorizing as well as the other core commitments of both the *generalist* and *particularist* approach serious and to thus comprise the best of both worlds.

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<sup>258</sup> cf. Coady 2007, 202

<sup>259</sup> cf. Dentith; Keeley 2018, 292

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 291

*Particularists* have been accused of being conspiracy theory apologists and generalists have been accused of promoting “anti-conspiracy theory panic.”<sup>261</sup> I suggest a *moderate* or *sophisticated* form of *particularism* that takes serious common problems associated with UCTs and the concerns of *generalists* more broadly as well as the value of the *particularist* approach of proper investigation and evaluation on the individual evidential merits.

Such *moderate particularism* is also consistent with the approach to demarcation endorsed in this thesis and represents, in this authors view, the best approach of philosophical engagement with CTs. Even if one thinks the majority of CTs in the total pool of CTs are UCTs, a *moderate particularist* stance seems to be the best option if the aim is that the least number of conspiracies go unnoticed and that the harm of UCTs is adequately detected.

In the last two decades the *particularist* stance became widely accepted in the philosophical debate on conspiracy theory theory and established “something like a broad consensus” that “as explanations, conspiracy theories are not intrinsically irrational.”<sup>262</sup> The *particularist* consensus goes hand in hand with the broad and minimal definition of CT as theory about conspiracy, or in Dentiths sense the explanation of an event citing the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause. Although this neutral minimal account of CTs has some issues, for example including trivial cases like the planning of surprise parties or business meetings and is deviating from the colloquial use, which need not necessarily be a problem, I agree with the sentiment that this minimal account is best suited for the purpose of the philosopher of studying the epistemology of CTs, and it is especially well suited for the study of demarcation criteria since this definition is the broadest in scope and includes most cases of CTs, warranted and unwarranted.<sup>263</sup> Regarding the fruitfulness of interdisciplinary research Duetz for example argues that such non discipline-specific neutral and minimalist account as common ground would be beneficial since this would get different disciplines to recognize the ways in which they add to the neutral definition relating to their research purposes, which is then putting forward “an evaluative rather than descriptive conception”.<sup>264</sup> However, some areas of research may justifiably just be concerned with a specific subset of CTs.

Since the broad *particularist* definition of CTs considers well established historical facts about conspiracies and false theories about existing conspiracies both as “conspiracy theories” independent of their truth and officialness it may be useful to introduce the term “proven conspiracy

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<sup>261</sup> Basham; Dentith 2016, 14

<sup>262</sup> Patrick Stokes 2018, 25 in: Dentith, Matthew 2018b

<sup>263</sup> cf. Duetz 2022, 12

<sup>264</sup> Duetz 2022, 12

theory” (PCT) as to not conflate cases of true WCTs and clearly false UCTs under the same label. Considering the case of 9/11 there is one official PCT, ie. the Al-Qaida theory, and numerous UCTs that surround the event and to use the same term for either of these seems to lack precision. This is also in accordance with the colloquial use of the term “conspiracy theory” which does not consider officially endorsed, true and corroborated explanations of events citing conspiracies as CTs as to separate them from CTs that lack substance and constitute a different class of explanation.

And since CTs can be unwarranted in two ways it seems to be useful to distinguish these two types as well: UCTs are unwarranted because there is either (1) not yet enough evidence available to expose the conspiracy or (2) there has never existed a conspiracy which is the reason why there is no evidence. The latter case subsumes cases of clearly and sufficiently refuted false theories while the theory is true in the former case but lacks sufficient evidence. To differentiate the latter case from the former one might introduce a term like “conspiracy myth” (CM), as is common in the German-speaking discourse about CTs, to delineate clear cases of false theories that have been sufficiently refuted, which is then an empirical matter. To distinguish the broad label of CT into PCTs and WCTs would probably disentangle some of the confusions that seem to lead to equivocations.

In this sense of the distinction psychologists and sociologists are very well justified in drawing conclusions from the study of CMs as false beliefs, but these results cannot legitimately be generalized to conspiracy theorizing or CTs in general, since they concern this specific subclass of UCTs.

We then have the label “CT” referring to all classes of conspiracy theories and the labels “PCT” and “CM” to specifically pick out the classes of conspiracy theories being warranted because they are true, in the former case, and conspiracy theories that have been proven to false, in the latter case. Applied to the 9/11 example the Al-Qaida theory is a PCT while the controlled demolition theory is a CM.

This terminology may be confusing at first and might not be easy to establish in the individual case of conspiracy theories but would provide more clarity than simply labeling for example theories about the disk-shape of the flat earth and factual accounts of conspiracy like Watergate, as “CT”. The distinction of the specific classes of PCTs and CMs serves utility in precisely this sense that individual cases are more easily distinguished, and more relevant information is provided as when simply referring to the whole class as “CTs”.

## 11. Conspiracism and the total pool of CTs

From the approach to demarcation offered in this thesis one can derive some hypotheses relating to conspiracy theory theory:

The concept of conspiracism is usually assumed to be concerned with conspiracy theorists but it also seems reasonable to assume that conspiracists not only hold conspiracy beliefs in special ways, ie. *sans evidence*, but that they do this because they hold onto specific CTs, namely UCTs. So, I argue that conspiracism is not only concerned with a kind of theorizing about CTs, but it is first and foremost related to the kind of CTs, ie. UCTs, conspiracists adhere to. Surprisingly conspiracism is usually associated with the kind of conspiracy theorizing or of holding conspiratorial beliefs rather than with the kind of CTs endorsed by conspiracists. Dentith for example argues that “the charge of conspiracism implies” that the crux of the problem lies with “the people generating or believing the theories” rather than with the resulting theories.<sup>265</sup>

Drawing on Boudry’s concept of epistemic black holes and the self-sealing logic of CTs, I argue that conspiracism is most fittingly considered as a kind of worldview. This also seems to be what Hofstadter seemed to have in mind talking about the *paranoid style* and the fear of non-existent conspiracies. A conspiracist will not be concerned with one single CT, he rather will entertain multiple UCTs and will be highly dedicated in his investigation that is distorted by a mixture of epistemically virtuous and vicious traits as well as general psychological biases and mechanisms that are also associated with conspiracy belief. To borrow Boudry’s phrasing: A conspiracist is one who is prepared to attribute preternatural powers and intelligence to the conspirators in his favorite UCTs so that no amount of evidence can shake his conviction.<sup>266</sup>

The first argument hence is that conspiracism is not only concerned with the kind of engagement with CTs but also with the kind of CTs that are of concern.

Secondly, I argue that the pool of all CTs consists mainly of UCTs since conspiracists are very active investigators and since, as Boudry argued, every big historical event will spawn CTs independent of any conspiracy occurring. It seems obvious that if conspiracists are the kind of conspiracy theorists which are generally quite active in their truth-seeking endeavors and with which the *generalist* literature is mostly concerned, ie. the kind of conspiracy theorists exhibiting epistemic vices as well as some of the psychological mechanisms and biases associated with conspiracy belief, that the theories produced by conspiracists will likely turn out to be unwarranted. Also, it seems reasonable to assume that conspiracists understood in this sense will

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<sup>265</sup> Dentith; Keeley 2018, 287

<sup>266</sup> cf. Boudry 2022, 15

likely contribute the majority of theories to the total pool of all CTs. Additionally, it is also worth noting that the spreading of CTs also evolved to be some kind of business with millions of dollars to be earned potentially, as is the case with Alex Jones, which then provides a financial incentive to stick with some kind of framing if it proves to be financially successful. This claim then, if true, would justify some degree of *prima facie* suspicion about CTs since it would be reasonable to assume that a CT is unwarranted, in the sense of being false, when encountering a CT if the majority of CTs are in fact UCTs in the sense of CMs. As I repeatedly emphasized, this does not entail dismissal and rejection without investigation, but it goes some way in explaining and justifying the negative connotation of terms like “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorists”.

To be technically correct I might add “philosophically interesting” to “the pool of all CTs”, since a lot of warranted CTs are not politically and philosophically interesting as is the case with the planning of surprise birthday parties. And since I take the general interest about CTs to be concerned with politically relevant CTs and see a fundamental difference between birthday parties and the organization of large-scale impactful conspiracies like terror attacks or elaborate government plots in the sense that the prevalence of the former is being uninformative about the prevalence of the latter in terms of prior probability, I take such a narrowing to be justified. Then the pool of all philosophically interesting and politically relevant CTs is tinted by UCTs and some degree of suspicion about CTs in general is justified, not in the sense of blanket dismissal but in the sense of a reasonable expectation that the specific example, when confronted with a new CT, will turn out to be another UCT. I call this argument the *needle-in-a-haystack argument* even though such name is hyperbolic in the sense that there is not just one (singular) PCT in the haystack of all CTs, but it should illustrate the difference in ratio and express the disbalance of mostly UCTs being in the pool of all CTs.

But since no demarcation can be performed *a priori* a blanket dismissal of CTs is ill-advised, any initial suspicion ought to be substantiated by further investigation as this approach of demarcation suggests.

## 12. Conclusion

The debate about CTs in philosophy is split between *particularists* and *generalists* with a *particularist* consensus emerging. In this thesis I defended a moderate version of *particularism* analogously to Boudry’s notion of moderate *generalism*. Since a demarcation of UCTs and legitimate CTs cannot be achieved *a priori* moderate *particularism* puts strong emphasis on the

investigation of CTs based on their individual evidential merits. A demarcation and rejection of the CT can then be performed *a posteriori* by applying the criteria of demarcation to individual examples.

The list of demarcation criteria derived from the literature consist of 1) the state of progression/degeneration of the research programme, 2) maturity, 3) hyper-skepticism, 4) recurrent conspiracy narratives, 5) fantastical conspiracy theories, 6) defectibility, 7) attribution of preternatural powers to the conspirators, 8) scope, 9) openness and 10) domain. This list of criteria is supposed to provide more utility for analyzing and evaluating CTs regarding their warrant than any single criterion could provide.

Boudry provided the most convincing approach of demarcation linking the overdetermination of effects by causes in nature implied by the principle of asymmetry of cause and effect to the underdetermination of CTs, pointing out the traps of conspiracy belief with his analogy of epistemic black holes and linking all this analysis to his criterion of the attribution of preternaturally powerful and smart conspirators that is required to maintain belief in mature CTs. Clarke's approach also turned out be useful in analyzing CTs from a philosophy of science point of view although with the status of research programmes the threshold of a research programme being in the state of degeneration is somewhat vague.

In applying the criteria to the paradigmatic examples of UCTs and WCTs presented in this thesis, the ability to perform what was desired was illustrated satisfactorily. The application of the criteria to individual cases performed in this thesis hence supports the view that the criteria are useful for practical application and fulfill the required purpose. I thus conclude that a demarcation of *warranted* from *unwarranted* CTs is possible, although there is no 100% clear line, and that the presented criteria are superior to single-criterion approaches and go some way of achieving their end. Drawing on Boudry's conception of moderate *generalism* a form of *moderate particularism* is defended in this thesis in line with the approach to demarcation suggested. *Moderate particularism* as defended here takes serious both the recurrent epistemological issues associated with CTs as well as the *particularist* emphasis on evaluation on the particular evidential merits since the impossibility of a clear demarcation is acknowledged. Furthermore, the broad and minimalist definition of "conspiracy theory" as the most suitable one for the purpose of philosophical analysis of epistemology was defended and, with the *needle-in-a-haystack argument*, some degree of *prima facie* suspicion and skepticism about (politically relevant) CTs was justified rendering the negative connotation of the term "conspiracy theory" as thus understandable to some degree.

Another conclusion reached consisted of the insight that general *prima facie* suspicion in the sense of dismissal of CTs without investigation lacks intellectual diligence since it cannot be justified. Some amount of *prima facie suspicion* in the sense of suspicion about the CT being unwarranted on the other hand can be justified in relation to some features CTs may exhibit, or by the fact, as was argued, that most CTs in the pool of all politically relevant CTs are in fact UCTs. But such a demarcation based on features can only be achieved *a posteriori* and thus still requires some amount of investigation.

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## **Abstract:**

This thesis concerns the issue of the demarcation of unwarranted conspiracy theories from their warranted and legitimate counterparts. The literature on the epistemology of conspiracy theories is discussed and general criteria of demarcation are derived, which are then put in conjunction as to constitute a list of multiple criteria analogously to multi-criterial approaches to demarcation in philosophy of science’s traditional demarcation problem.

After starting with some preliminary remarks in section 2 contextualizing the approach of this thesis with philosophy of science’s traditional demarcation problem of the demarcation of science from pseudoscience different definitions of “conspiracy theory” as well as the working

definition of this thesis are discussed in section 3. Section 4 discusses different paradigmatic examples of warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories cited in the literature. Before the standard criticisms that are rejected by particularists are discussed in section 6, section 5 is dedicated to the epistemological structure of conspiracy theories examining various features typically associated with conspiracy theories. Section 7 concerns the derivation of demarcation criteria from different approaches in the literature including the approaches of Steve Clarke evaluating conspiracy theories in terms of Lakatosian scientific research programmes, Brian Keeley arguing for a criterion to reject unwarranted conspiracy theories as well as Mathew Dentith's approach of identifying recurrent suspicious features of conspiracy theories and Boudry's approach of arguing for a demarcation criterion defending a stance he terms *moderate generalism*. Section 8 then discusses the criteria and compiles the criteria derived in the previous section to constitute a list which is then, in section 9, applied to the paradigmatic examples laid out in section 4 as to test the criteria's practical utility. Before concluding in section 12, section 10 concerns conspiracy theory theory and defends a moderate form of *particularism* and section 11 concerns the phenomenon of conspiracism, where the insights of this thesis are applied and an argument that justifies some amount of *prima facie* suspicion in the sense of the reasonable expectation that an encountered conspiracy theory, when being confronted with a new conspiracy theory, will likely turn out to be false is put forward.

### **Abstract (Deutsch):**

Diese Arbeit beschäftigt sich, analog zum Problem der Demarkation von Wissenschaft und Pseudowissenschaft, mit dem Problem der Demarkation von gerechtfertigten und ungerechtfertigten Verschwörungstheorien. Die Literatur zur Epistemologie von Verschwörungstheorien wird diskutiert und allgemeine Kriterien der Demarkation werden aus verschiedenen Ansätzen abgeleitet. Jene Kriterien werden dann in einer Liste multipler Kriterien zusammengefügt, analog zu Multi-Kriterien Ansätzen zum traditionellen Demarkationsproblem in der Wissenschaftsphilosophie.

Nach der Einleitung und einigen vorbereitenden Anmerkungen zur Kontextualisierung des Themas und Terminologie in Abschnitt 2, werden in Abschnitt 3 verschiedene Definitionsansätze sowie die verwendete Arbeitsdefinition diskutiert. Abschnitt 4 behandelt verschiedene paradigmatische Beispiele von gerechtfertigten und ungerechtfertigten Verschwörungstheorien, welche in der Literatur besprochen werden. Nachdem in Abschnitt 5 die Epistemologie von Verschwörungstheorien sowie charakteristische Aspekte behandelt werden, diskutiert Abschnitt 6 die

sogenannte Standardkritik an Verschwörungstheorien. In Abschnitt 7 werden die Demarkationskriterien aus verschiedenen philosophischen Ansätzen abgeleitet. Die behandelten Ansätze umfassen jene von Steve Clarke, der Verschwörungstheorien im Rahmen von Lakatosianischen Forschungsprogrammen analysiert, Brian Keeley, der für ein Demarkationskriterium argumentiert sowie die Ansätze von Mathew Dentith, welcher verschiedene suspekte Eigenschaften von Verschwörungstheorien behandelt und Maarten Boudry's Ansatz, der für ein Demarkationskriterium argumentiert und eine Position des moderaten Generalismus vertritt. In Abschnitt 8 werden die abgeleiteten Demarkationskriterien diskutiert und zu einer Liste zusammengefügt, welche im Anschluss in Abschnitt 9 an die paradigmatischen Beispiele aus Abschnitt 4 angewendet und hinsichtlich des Zweckes evaluiert wird. Vor der Konklusion in Abschnitt 12, dass eine Demarkation im Bereich von Verschwörungstheorien durch die behandelten Kriterien möglich ist, wird in Abschnitt 10 Verschwörungstheoriethorie behandelt und eine moderate Form des Partikularismus verteidigt. Abschnitt 11 diskutiert das Phänomen des Konspirazismus (conspiracism), wendet die Erkenntnisse der Arbeit auf dieses an und stellt ein Argument vor, welches einen gewissen Grad an *prima facie* Verdacht im Sinne der vernünftigen Erwartung, dass eine neue Verschwörungstheorie, mit der man konfrontiert wird, höchstwahrscheinlich falsch ist rechtfertigt.