

Conspiracy, Censorship, and the Public Sphere

1. Introduction

These days, one can hardly pick up a newspaper without seeing references to Q-Anon and other conspiracy theories such as ones about Covid-19, or to news about attempts to censor the distribution of ideas associated with them. From what I have seen, the ideas associated with Q-Anon seem to be silly, and also – e.g. to the extent to which they feed into phenomena like the storming of Congress – to be problematic in their consequences. The same is true of the anti-vaccination stories. But the reactions to them also seem to me to be mistaken. In this piece, I will discuss some general issues about conspiracy theories, and suggest how we might address them.

2. Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories

In his *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Karl Popper made some interesting points about conspiracies and conspiracy theories.¹ He argued that, if we look at social life and political history, there have been, and are, plenty of conspiracies. But, he noted, the striking thing about them, is that they are seldom successful. Like the actions of all of us, those of conspirators are fallible. They may get things wrong, or, to the degree to which they succeed in what they are trying to do, we will often find that their actions have unintended consequences. These may be very different from what they had expected. In addition, conspiracies typically depend on people being able to keep their plans secret. But secrets are difficult to keep. People may leak them to friends, and those friends to their friends. While if what people are doing is illegal or in other ways problematic, members of the conspiracy may well be tempted to betray their fellow conspirators. They might hope for a reward of some kind for so doing, or because they become

¹ See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945 etc), chapter 14; For an important discussion of conspiracy claims without the articulation of theories, see Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People are Saying*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.

worried about what the consequences might be for them, if the conspiracy were to fail (or, even succeed!).

Conspiracy *theories* typically start from some real-world phenomenon, and claim that we should explain its occurrence as the result of a successful conspiracy. But Popper offered two arguments against this being a fruitful approach for us to take. It *may* be correct that the event was the product of a conspiracy. But there are two related problems about *assuming* that it is. The first is the other side of the argument on which I reported above: that while conspiracies exist, they are seldom successful – so it would be unusual if what we are interested in is, in fact, the result of a successful conspiracy. The second, is that the underlying approach illustrates a mistaken view of the social world: i.e., the idea that, if something happens, then there must be someone, or some people, responsible for it: who have wanted to bring it about. Now, at the level of individual actions, this is a reasonable enough view to take. But even here, things may occur which people had not intended. They may have been absent-minded. They may have misjudged what the consequences would be of the action that they were taking. Or it may simply be the case that while they were successful in accomplishing what they had intended, *how* they did it also had other consequences which they had not anticipated.

But it is at the social level – where we are dealing with the large-scale products of human actions – that an expectation that what occurs is what people had intended to bring about is problematic. For social phenomena, generally, are typically the products of the actions of many different people. And those actions generate all kinds of consequences, at the macro level, which none of the actors may have had any ideas about, at all – and by which we may be baffled. Much of the progress in our knowledge in the social science has been a matter of explaining how large-scale phenomena in fact come about, and of getting past the idea that they are the product of human or divine intentions.

3. But What about Banning?

Some people seem to think that the right way to deal with problematic conspiracy theories, is to ban their dissemination. While other people are getting excited because their dissemination is being banned by various social media. We also get invocations of ideas about the freedom of speech on one or other side of the argument. What has gone on here, seems to me to be a mess.

First, banning looks counter-productive. On the one side, it is ineffectual: on the face of it, there is no way in which the dissemination of ideas can be stopped within a free society. While any algorithmic apparatus that attempts to do this, is likely also to catch other ideas which are unproblematic, as well as pieces which are simply discussing the problematic ideas; e.g. for the purposes of criticism. One might, here, recall the history of algorithmic censorship of all kinds of unproblematic material because it resembled or appeared to resemble swear words, or common expressions for parts of the human anatomy. On the other side, the attempt to censor the dissemination of such ideas would on the face of it serve to make some of the claims of those who are peddling these theories seem more plausible. After all, if they say that we are the victims of a conspiracy by some elite, what might seem more suggestive than that their efforts to warn us about this are being suppressed?

Second, there is the question of banning material from a specific service, or of a host refusing to be the base upon which a service is run, as happened recently to the service 'Parler'.² As things stand, it is not clear that there is an issue here, as one is dealing with private companies, who on the face of it should be free to choose whether or not to take a particular product. After all, a newspaper is free to decline advertising from a client, if they find it problematic. But it could be argued: should

² <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jul/01/parler-conservative-twitter-new-free-speech-social-network>

not some important providers, here, have 'common carrier' status³ – and be under the same kind of obligation as, in the past, the postal service typically was obliged to carry mail to every address in the country, and not to refuse material just because people might disapprove of what was inside an envelope. But if this was thought attractive, then on the face of it, legislation would need to be passed which spelled out what was required. It would seem to me that the people running these services should be offered financial compensation, too. This they would be free to take, or to reject, if they did not wish to have common carrier service.⁴ If this was to be done, it would require some hard thought as to what content they would be obliged to carry. (For example, if a dominant service messaging was being provided by or for Catholics, it would not seem appropriate that they should be obliged to carry material which openly gave updated versions of early Protestant claims that the Pope was the Antichrist.)

4. Mill, Freedom of Opinion, and Pornography

In this whole context, one is liable to have ideas paraded about a 'right to free speech', or passages quoted from John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Let me consider these issues in turn.

The idea that there is a right to freedom of speech, or indeed, free expression as such, seems to me strange. Clearly, if you own a large field and stand in the middle of it, then on the face of it you should be able to say anything that you wish to. But this is because no-one else can hear you. If we are dealing with a situation in which other people can hear you, or in which you are standing in a public street, then matters are more complex. For you are no longer dealing just with issues which relate to your own property. Other people's property, or that of the government, come into the situation. And the rules affecting

³ See for a recent discussion see Tunku Varadarajan, 'The "Common Carrier" Objection to social-media Censorship', *WSJ Opinion*, 15th January 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-common-carrier-solution-to-social-media-censorship-11610732343?page=1>.

⁴ In the case of post offices, they typically acquired a legal monopoly, as the other side of the obligation to deliver to everyone. It is not at all clear why a private company should find itself in such a position, just because, while others are free to compete with them, it acquires a dominant position just because – as with Google – its users think its service much better than the competitors.

this are matters for determination by the law, or public policy decisions. That is to say, they are issues which are a matter of argument. Here, an individual's concern for self-expression may be one factor which is of significance. But there are also many other significant issues, too, which will not necessarily weigh in favour of freedom of speech or self-expression.

If we are concerned with matters which have to be argued – rather than supposedly self-evident rights⁵ – then John Stuart Mill's arguments in *On Liberty* are very much to the point. We are fallible, and we can, indeed, hope to learn from criticisms made by others, and they from us. (Although Popper's argument that people need to go into these discussions bearing mind that they might be wrong, and that we can hope to learn from others, is important, here.) Truth also plays an important regulative role, in the sense that we need to go into these discussions with the hope that we may make progress towards truth. But two issues are worth stressing.

The first is that this argument about truth – which is powerful, and which also gives us a reason for according respect to others, and according them some autonomy if we wish to learn from them – is limited in its scope. It does not provide grounds for the freedom of artistic expression, or, say, for the protection of the production of pornography. There might be *other* arguments for this – e.g. ones which appeal to utility. But those who favour them would also have to meet arguments which might be advanced against their view, on this basis. Second, it seems to me only to offer a basis for saying that people should be free to produce arguments, and to disseminate them – which is something very different from, say, freedom to insult other people, their religion, and so on. This broad argument of Mill's thus does not provide cover for the stupid editor of *Jyllandsposten* in Denmark. He, rather than, say, convening a meeting in which issues of censorship and self-censorship, which concerned him, could have been

⁵ Two issues are worth mentioning here. (a) as Karl Popper argued, something being self-evident to someone hardly shows us that the claim involved is correct; (b) that as we are dealing with issues which are contested by others, they are hardly 'self-evident' in a sense that means 'obvious to everyone'.

discussed in a respectful way, asked people to contribute visual material to his paper which he knew would be found upsetting by some of his fellow-citizens. Similarly, Mill provides no cover for *Charlie Hebdo's* schoolboy-style insults.

The second, is that there is an important issue concerning *where* criticism takes place. I mean, here, not that, say, criticisms of the military policy of some country are not appropriately voiced at the private funerals of soldiers who have been killed in a war (although that is important).⁶ Rather, there is an important problem about how one can have a 'public sphere' of a kind which is appropriate for such exchanges. Juergen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* seems to me – despite its typical Habermasian indigestibility – to be of great interest on this topic (while also saying important things about the problems of populism).⁷ But today, we face a more insidious problem.

5. The Social Epistemology of Social Media

Social epistemology – at least in some interpretations – seems to me particularly important. For it provides a way in which we can investigate, and then improve, the cognitive properties of our social institutions.⁸ One key issue here, is this. Karl Popper has argued that we bring to our understanding of the world all kinds of preconceptions. In part, these may be biologically-based. In part, they may be taken over from our social background. In part, they may stem from ideas of different kinds to which we may be attracted. The key problem, however, is that all of our ideas are fallible: they may be wrong. And as Popper has suggested, we need to put them to the test, or to expose them to what other people who disagree with us may say about them by

⁶ Ideas in the United States based on 'first amendment rights' which are taken to support such things, should in my view be rejected.

⁷ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* [1962], Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989; see also Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.

⁸ See, for a brief overview of my approach to this, 'Popper, Social Epistemology and Dialogue', *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6, no. 9 (2017): 1-12.

way of criticism. This is not something that comes easily to us: our natural inclinations, as it were, are to wish to get our ideas confirmed; to have people agree with us.

It is here that social media seem to me to strike a massive blow against us. For they pander to our epistemologically problematic natural inclinations. And, if we go along with them – if we use Facebook, say, not as a way to exchange photographs of cats, and interesting recipes, but as a key source of news – then we are in trouble. For Facebook and other social media do not charge us for their services. Rather, they get us to agree to their extracting data from us, and then either sell this on or use it to sell adverts directed at ourselves and others who share particular characteristics with us. Further, in order to do this, they supply us with material which attracts our attention, and leads us to linger on their pages, where the adverts appear. This is done, by way of the creation of what one might call bubbles of spurious confirmation round us. We are given material which does not challenge us, but which confirms our prejudices – either directly, or by way of telling us how evil or silly those are who do not agree with us⁹.

This is bad enough. But it also influences our expectations concerning media, generally. In Britain, *The Times* used to pride itself as being 'the newspaper of record', and set out to convey the truth about things, calling on expert opinion for explanations of difficult issues.¹⁰ Now, if one looks at *The Times* on-line, one has lots of eye-catching pictures and short headlines, followed by what are, all too often, just snippets of information. Rather than the tough reading which they used to present, one has, instead, something more like the entertainment that was offered by middle-range papers in the past. While, in addition, advertising has migrated to social media and to the internet more

⁹ For a useful critical discussion of claims such as these, see Axel Bruns, *Are Filter Bubbles Real?* London: Polity, 2019. But see also Cass R. Sunstein, *#republic*, Woodstock, Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2018.

¹⁰ An interesting account of this is given in Peregrine Worsthorne's *Tricks of Memory: An Autobiography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993).

generally, so that 'serious' newspapers can no longer undertake the kind of expensive investigative journalism that they provided in the past.

There has also been an increasing tendency to mix news and opinion. This, itself, is in some ways no bad thing. There is no way in which, by trying hard, we can be 'objective' in the sense of not having bias or a point of view. Clearly, we can try to be fair in the presentation of factual material, and fair to both sides when presenting an argument. But one of the key aspects of Popper's approach, is the idea that we can't tell if we are biased, or have preconceptions which are adversely affecting how we view things. These can only be learned, by way of criticism from others. At the same time, as we *all* have biases and preconceptions, to have such things is not something for which we should be blamed at a personal level: things could hardly be different. In addition, those who raise problems about our work, will also have biases of their own. What we need, it seems to me, is to work *together* to create a setting in which we can learn from one another without insulting one another, or rancour. As Popper argued in *The Open Society*, objectivity is a social product, and it is something towards which we should aim.¹¹ And just because receiving criticism of our entrenched ideas may be psychologically difficult for us, however good for us it might in fact be, everyone needs to work hard at presenting criticism in such a way that it will not be experienced as unpleasant.

It is also vital to bear in mind that *all* our knowledge itself is fallible. Not only – as Popper stressed – does the fact that we are sure about something not mean that it is true. But it will seldom be the case that work which is, in one way or another, faulty will not be without value. It is striking that, these days, rather than criticism being conducted in the kind of spirit that a Popperian approach would suggest, it is offered in the spirit of 'J'accuse!', or a bit like emotional denunciations of the supposedly bourgeois tendencies of hard-working peasants or teachers, in China's Cultural Revolution. We need to bear in mind, first, that our criticisms themselves may well not be correct, and that the fervour which inspires us may well be grounded in erroneous ideas. (The

¹¹ See his *Open Society*, chapter 23.

Marxist-derived notion of the perspective of the oppressed being objective and having a hot line to truth, is rubbish. They may well know about oppression about which others are not aware, and, as Popper stressed, the idea of the 'rational unity of mankind' – that pertinent criticism can come from anyone, and that we should all be open to critical ideas from any source – is very much to the point. But, other things being equal, the oppressed are also likely to have limited knowledge, and may not be able to put their points well. This suggests that they may need assistance to explicate their points from others who are not disadvantaged in these ways: the idea that any such arrangement must be 'inauthentic' is nonsense.) Above all, just because significant criticism is correctly made of some perspective, does not mean that that perspective is worthless and that there may not be much of value to be learned from it. One of the (in my view many) problems of Edward Said's *Orientalism*,¹² is that it has led many young people to simply dismiss material written about countries in the Middle East by Western writers, and work by Western anthropologists. Rather, we need to work together, learning from one another, so as gradually to improve our knowledge, correcting one another's errors, through an ongoing process of conjecture and refutation.

6. But what, then About Conspiracy Theories?

In my view, three things are needed.

First, it seems to me completely incorrect that there should be attempts to suppress such views. But we need to encourage those proffering such views to shift to settings in which they are opened up to criticism. What we need are social media which offer links to well-expressed, and temperate, critiques of material which is being posted, and which require people, if they make factual claims, to give references to appropriate sources, or to indicate how they can be tested. This would mean moderated services (and, I would hope, a shift to a fee-based model), and also a campaign to try to convince people why they should

¹² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

make use of these, rather than on what is simply fed to them – for the benefit of advertisers – on Facebook and similar sites. This does not mean that one can't keep social media on the existing basis, for pictures of cats and so on. But one could surely encourage people not to become dupes of Social Media algorithms.

Now the internet does provide people with the means to search for such critical appraisals themselves. Subscriptions to newspapers – with different perspectives – from all over the world, are available cheaply. Through these, both factual reports and the expression of opinions can be cross-checked quite easily. But it is not everyone who will think of using them. It also seems to me vital that newspapers should be encouraged to have a well-monitored 'comments' section, onto which criticism can be made, and onto which readers can post links to other, related, material. It seems to me a scandal, for example, that the otherwise excellent *The Economist*, dropped this (after a previous period in which their comments section was not monitored, and attracted all kinds of rubbish). But their dropping this has had the consequence that there is no opportunity for readers to take to task the often-striking bias displayed in their in general excellent reporting.

Second, I would suggest that there is a need for well-moderated, calm and un-sensationalized discussion programmes on television, in which ideas are discussed, after the fashion of the kind of 'Popperian' treatment that I have indicated. I.e., rather than having people shouting at one another, one might, say, have a critic of some perspective explain, initially, what they understand the character of the view to be with which they are disagreeing, without expressing their criticisms. A proponent of the view would then be asked to explain – in a temperate manner – if there were things that they thought that the critic had got wrong. Once there was broad agreement about this – and agreement to differ over contentious points, for the sake of the programme – the critic would be invited to indicate what in their opinion were a few of the problems of the view, as outlined. And the defender of the view could, then, respond to them. The moderator would be needed to clarify the argument, to sum up, and to keep the discussion

civil, and one from which everyone can learn. Participants might be silenced – or dropped from the programme (in the sense of the camera being turned off them, and their sound cut off) – if they behave in ways which break the epistemologically-generated rules. They would, of course, be free to raise a point about the rules, if they thought that these were problematic. But, on the face of it, the threat of being removed from the discussion, and the rest of it consisting just of an interchange between the moderator and their critic, should keep them behaving well.

Third, in addition to material not being censored (at least in terms of its content), it would be vital to provide an incentive for the keeping of a critical record of the history of the development of views over time, and of how their proponents have reacted to criticism. As Popper and Lakatos stressed, what is crucial to our evaluation of a view, is to track its development over time. If people make a claim and it gets into difficulties, how do they react to this? The mark of the charlatan, is that they try to re-interpret their views in ways that simply cover up the fact that they have shifted their ground. Or they try to deny that they ever had the initial views which they set out – it is striking the way in which intellectually oppressive movements tend to cover up their history, so that their current followers have no idea what views were associated with their approach in the past. We need to make sure that shifts in position do not go unrecorded, and that the key Popperian questions about how such views are to be tested (if they are empirical), or otherwise critically assessed, are not evaded. If claims are made about what their critics have said, and the extent to which these criticisms have been met, they need to be checked out. There is thus a need for *critical* histories of movements, theories and disciplines, which we can take as explaining the problem-situation to be addressed if we wish to engage with the ideas in question. The production of such histories – on which both proponents and critics of the ideas could and should engage – would seem to me to properly represent the heart of academic work.

Such activities, in my view, should have pride of place in all academic disciplines, and would then serve as the background against which new ideas are proposed and evaluated. Such accounts would also serve as a proper background for our practical understanding of the world. But for this to happen, there would need to be considerable changes in how universities and knowledge-related institutions operate. Currently, scholars are expected to contribute short, technical pieces of work in their appropriate field; pieces of Kuhnian 'normal science'. (In my view, Max Weber made the appropriate response when asked: 'What is your field?': 'I am not a donkey; I don't have a field'.¹³ At the same time, the existence of critical histories of the sort to which I have referred, would mean that, if one became interested in a problem in some area, it would be easy enough in principle to find out how the problem-situation currently stood.)

Work of this kind is, however, not the kind of thing which typically gets academic recognition. And it is re-enforced by the rules concerning the funding of research, the governing promotion and tenure, and the basis on which research is accepted for publication. In my view, the social epistemology of the current methods for the production of knowledge, stands in need of critical examination. But that, clearly, is a task for another occasion.

¹³ See, for example, John A. Hall, *Ernest Gellner: An Intellectual Biography*, London & New York: Verso, 2010, p. 374; Hall references an obituary in *The Economist*, 25th November, 1995, p. 168.