Survival Instinct: A Critique of Deficit Models of Conspiracy Thinking

Tomáš KOLLÁRIK

Abstract

This paper offers a philosophical critique of the prevailing deficit models of conspiracy thinking, which reduce it to psychological pathology or epistemic failure (Douglas et al. 2017; Cassam 2019). Drawing on the concept of the "anti-anti conspiracy theorist," I propose an alternative framework grounded in the interdependence of trust and control. I argue that conspiracy narratives are not an escape into a "psychological paradise" of certainty, but rather a manifestation of an "anxiety hell" that individuals enter upon losing trust in the system. Using the analytical metaphor of the Matrix, the dialectic of trust and control, and a typology distinguishing identity-based and reactive types, I demonstrate that conspiracy thinking can be a comprehensible response to perceived institutional dysfunction and alienation from power. The paper concludes with an open question: is the restoration of trust possible without a fundamental reassessment of the current arrangement of control and bureaucratization?

Keywords

conspiracy theories, survival instinct, trust and control, bureaucratization of power, anti-anti conspiracy theorist, media polarization

1. Introduction: The Limits of Deficit Models and Combative Rhetoric

Contemporary public discourse on disinformation and conspiracy theories has reached an impasse. The dominant framing, adopted by political elites and mainstream media alike, relies on the metaphor of war. We speak of "information warfare," "hybrid threats," and the imperative to "fight hoaxes." While this stance is motivated by a legitimate desire to protect democratic institutions, it paradoxically accelerates polarization.

The fundamental problem with this approach is its implicit reliance on what I call the deficit model. It presupposes a society divided into "informed" citizens who accept the institutional interpretation of reality, and "disoriented" ones who suffer from cognitive deficits, psychological instability, or moral failure. This view finds support in parts of the academic literature – whether in psychological functionalism (Douglas et al. 2017; Goertzel 1994; Leman & Cinnirella 2013), the theory of epistemic vices (Cassam 2019; Tvrdy 2022), or instrumental technocratism (Sunstein & Vermeule 2009). What unites these approaches is that they locate the source of the problem in the individual.

This paper offers a philosophical critique of these models and attempts to outline a conceptual alternative: the stance of the "anti-anti conspiracy theorist." This term does not imply defending the content of conspiracy theories, but rather rejecting the superficial pathologization of those who hold them. The central thesis is that mass inclination toward conspiracy thinking is not primarily an intellectual failure, but a symptom of systemic trust breakdown and a response to perceived power asymmetry.

2. The Paradise and Hell Paradox: A Critique of Psychological Functionalism

The first step toward reevaluating the phenomenon is to confront the widespread myth that people believe in conspiracies to satisfy existential needs. Psychological research (Douglas et al. 2017; Kruglanski 2004; Goertzel 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Leman & Cinnirella

2013) frequently operates with the hypothesis that conspiracy theories satisfy a need for security and cognitive closure in a chaotic world. The assumption is that belief in conspiracy theories reduces the unbearable complexity of the world to a comprehensible narrative and restores a sense of control.

However, this psychological functionalism encounters a fundamental contradiction, which I call the “Paradise and Hell Paradox”. If the primary motivation of the conspiracy theorist were the pursuit of psychological comfort, the content of conspiracy narratives would have to be reassuring. Yet the reality of the conspiracy universe is precisely the opposite. It is a world in which global elites plot depopulation, medicine serves genocide rather than health, and the individual is exposed to permanent, lethal, invisible threats. Accepting such a worldview does not reduce anxiety – on the contrary, it generates a state of permanent "anxiety hell." The conspiracy theorist enters a world where virtually no one can be trusted and danger lurks around every corner. The comfort-seeking hypothesis thus fails to explain why anyone would voluntarily choose to live in perpetual fear.

Reversing the perspective – viewing things from the conspiracy theorist’s own standpoint – reveals that it is rather the "mainstream subject" who satisfies this need. It is the “mainstream” citizen who believes in the functionality of institutions and the benevolence of the system in order to maintain the illusion of a safe world. Using terminology from popular culture (The Matrix), the mainstream stance may, from the conspiracy theorist’s viewpoint, correspond to choosing the "blue pill" – the decision to remain in a relatively safe and predictable world. This decision requires suppressing disturbing signals about systemic failures. Conversely, from the conspiracy theorist’s perspective, it is they who rejected this sense of security. They chose to confront what they consider a terrifying truth (the "red pill"). From this vantage point, conspiracy thinking is not a manifestation of weakness or escape, but rather a consequence of epistemic courage – the willingness to admit that the world is a far more dangerous place than the official narrative claims.

3. The Dialectic of Trust and Control

If we reject psychological reduction, we must seek an explanation in the structure of power. In a democratic arrangement, a fundamental principle holds: trust and control are communicating vessels.

An optimally calibrated democratic society resembles a fabric woven from two alternating threads – trust and control. Citizens place trust in the hands of politicians (indirect control), and this trust rests on the assumption that functional oversight institutions exist (elections, courts). When this equilibrium is disrupted, pathological forms of governance emerge.

3.1 The Dominance of Control: Bureaucratization

The first case is a situation where control prevails over trust. This phenomenon arises through the following mechanism: if I lose trust in someone who manages my affairs, I cease to believe they act in my interest. In that case, I attempt to regain control over my affairs – either by finding another trustworthy person or by "handling things myself."

When control dominates over trust in state administration, it amounts to an institutionalized decision by the system to "handle things itself." Since the system does not trust the human factor within it (whether the official or the citizen), it introduces mechanisms of multiple safeguards. Everything must be checked three times; every decision must be backed by several stamps from different bodies. The motivation here is not primarily malice, but an effort to eliminate error and ensure the "correctness" of processes.

The consequence, however, is rampant bureaucratization. Although motivated by the desire for order and justice, it leads to unwieldiness. Decision times become unnaturally long, and the paths leading to them are labyrinthine, full of potential objections. For the citizen, such a system becomes opaque and impractical, which paradoxically raises doubts: whom does this system actually serve?

The complex bureaucratic apparatus, due to its opacity, can indeed become a haven for backroom deals and free-rider influence. The more the system strives to control processes, the

more suspicious it may appear. What happens if someone within this system of control and distrust attempts to remove part of the bureaucratic burden? Such a person – as seen during COVID-19, when government 'fast-track' procurement was widely reinterpreted not as crisis management but as a loophole for cronyism – immediately draws suspicion of bad intentions. They are proposing to strengthen trust in a system built on the premise that no one should be trusted. This, predictably, reinforces the motive for control in a backlash. The master of the situation thus becomes the rubber stamp in the hands of an unelected bureaucrat, and civic trust erodes under the weight of incomprehensible regulations.

3.2 The Dominance of Trust: Authoritarian Blindness

The opposite extreme is the dominance of trust over control. This scenario occurs when a charismatic leader convinces people that they can trust him unconditionally because he acts for their good. The country may be enveloped in a certain peace, but it lasts only until the first critic speaks up. In a system built on blind trust, criticism is perceived not as feedback (control), but as betrayal. The ruler – as de Gaulle famously embodied with his identification of personal authority with national destiny – immediately portrays the critic as a representative of evil forces, an instrument of foreign power. Society is suddenly disturbed by fear of an external enemy.

Consequently, any significant deviation from the equilibrium of trust and control paves the way for non-democratic regimes. History demonstrates that the outcome is identical whether reached through the paralyzing paranoia of a Stalinist police state (hyper-control) or the surrender of autonomy to the Führerprinzip (hyper-trust): the destruction of the free citizen.

4. The Phenomenology of Powerlessness: Centralization and the Limits of the Individual

While the previous section analyzed the system, we must now examine how this system affects the individual. The key factor here is the centralization of power, which creates a vast administrative apparatus that bewilders ordinary people.

Centralization of power in a democratic society contributes to conspiracy thinking for three structural reasons. First, a sense of negligibility: the more extensive the administration of central power, the smaller the share of the individual's will in its decisions. Second, cognitive distance: the individual's mind must traverse a vast arc to imagine the path from their own will (casting a ballot) to the outcomes of political decisions. Third, incomprehensibility: the overgrown administrative apparatus, typically associated with highly centralized governance, is illegible to ordinary citizens.

The second and third factors are critical because they demand an enormous amount of trust from the citizen. Here, however, we encounter individual differences. The capacity to form an idea of the state apparatus, its components, and their interrelations is not uniform. It is constrained by the individual's cognitive abilities, education, life situation, the free time they can devote – alongside work and family care – to following public affairs etc.

While one person (say, a trained political scientist) may have a more or less accurate picture of political processes, another may be completely lost in the system. For this "lost" citizen, nothing remains but to extend their trust. But do they have enough? And when does trust become naivety? It should be added that, beyond education, unique life experience and individual character traits come into play when deciding to stop trusting. Some give politicians their trust a third time; others withdraw it after the first lie. The social, psychological, and situational differences relevant to the capacity to grant or withhold trust are so numerous that systemic measures cannot completely eliminate the readiness to incline toward conspiracy narratives based on loss of trust in power.

This situation of asymmetry and alienation is best illustrated by a thought experiment. Imagine that technologically superior aliens are approaching Earth. They possess means beyond our comprehension and have the power to fundamentally alter the conditions of our lives. We know we will be in a position of absolute powerlessness before them. In such a situation, the entire planet would pulsate with wild fears – do they want to destroy us? Enslave us? What will they do to us?

In the eyes of many citizens, today's elites – whether bureaucratic, political, or expert – have become precisely such "aliens." They are distant, inaccessible, possess power, and communicate in the incomprehensible language of expertise. The pressure on the citizen who subjectively perceives this chasm causes their suspicion toward "the system" to grow. In this context, a conspiracy theory is not a manifestation of stupidity, but the activation of the survival instinct in an environment that has become cognitively ungraspable and potentially hostile.

5. The Survival Instinct: Empirical Experience with Power

Richard Hofstadter (1964) and Quassim Cassam (2019) view conspiracy thinking as pathology or vice. However, this view ignores a deeper, almost instinctive human experience with power. The survival instinct is not merely an abstract evolutionary mechanism (though evolutionary psychology links it to hyperactive agency detection (HADD) as a byproduct of adaptation; Douglas et al. 2016), but pragmatic skepticism stemming from historical and personal experience (Acton 1887; Michels 1915; Cislak et al. 2018).

This defensive mechanism has a long tradition in political philosophy. Hobbes, in his state of nature, describes distrust as a fundamental principle – where common power (Leviathan) is absent, it is rational to assume that the other may become one's enemy (Hobbes 1651, Part I, Ch. 13).

The history of political philosophy and everyday experience teach us that power without control tends to corrupt and be abused at the expense of the weak. This experience is deeply etched into collective consciousness. If citizens find themselves in a situation where someone beyond their reach decides their fate (whether a politician, corporation, or "system"), a defensive mechanism activates suspicion as an instinctive reaction. In a situation of information asymmetry and powerlessness, it is safer to assume the powerful have bad intentions than to be naive.

In a healthy democracy, media serve to "civilize" this instinct – they hold the powerful accountable and give voice to the powerless. When media lose this function and begin to be

perceived as part of the establishment, the survival instinct "goes feral." It migrates to the unregulated sphere of alternative sources, where it seeks confirmation of its fears.

6. From Eratosthenes to Chatbots: An Epistemological Reflection

This epistemological reflection follows directly from the previous sections, where I discussed the activation of the survival instinct as a response to perceived distance from power and loss of trust. Critics of conspiracy theories (e.g., Cassam 2019) often argue that conspiracy theorists suffer from "epistemic vices" and deny science, portraying them as unscientific dogmatists. However, we forget that even our "scientific" worldview is primarily based on trust in authority, not direct verification – and it is precisely the absence of this trust (caused by systemic properties and failures, as described in sections 3 and 4) that characterizes the conspiracy theorist as someone who refuses to trust institutions.

The majority of the population believes in the spherical Earth model not because everyone has personally conducted Eratosthenes' shadow experiment, but because they trust institutions (schools, science) that present this model. This situation can be understood in light of Wittgenstein's concept of hinge propositions: in most epistemic systems – and especially in ordinary, everyday cognition – there are basic beliefs that are not derived from evidence but form the framework within which we can ask for evidence at all (Wittgenstein 1969, sec. 253). For most people, the spherical Earth is such a hinge proposition – it is not a conclusion from arguments, but a presupposition that makes argumentation possible. The conspiracy theorist is one who has called this framework into question and replaced it with another – their "certainty" has shifted elsewhere.

When trust in institutions collapses, arguments within the official model lose their weight. The example of chatbots (e.g., Flat-Earth Scholar) that can argue logically and consistently for a flat Earth (using laws of perspective etc.) shows that the conspiracy model can possess internal logic. The problem is not an inability to think, but the premise. If citizens accept the presupposition that authorities are untrustworthy (loss of trust), the subsequent derivation of conspiracy conclusions might be a logically coherent process.

Quine, in his epistemology, speaks of the system of beliefs as a man-made web, where revision of one statement can affect even deeper parts of the system, including logic, while others are on the periphery and more easily adjustable (Quine 1951, pp. 42-43). For the mainstream individual, the assumption of proper institutional functioning is a central certainty. For the conspiracy theorist, this certainty has shifted to the periphery – their center now consists of the belief in systemic dysfunction. In terms of social epistemology, we might speak of "testimonial injustice" (Fricker 2007) – when the epistemic authority of institutions is discredited by their own failures, the citizen suffers not only practical but also epistemic harm: they have lost a reliable way to know social reality.

7. A Typology of Distrust: The Identity-based and Reactive Types

For effective problem-solving, it is essential to abandon the homogeneous categorization of "conspiracy theorists" that lumps everyone together under dismissive labels like "conspiracy nut" or "tinfoil hatter." This homogenization is not only analytically flawed but also politically counterproductive. I propose distinguishing two basic ideal types: the Identity-based (entrenched) type and the Reactive (disappointed) type. This proposed typology aligns with recent shifts in social epistemology, distinguishing between 'epistemic populism' reliant on direct experience (Ylä-Anttila, 2018) and 'warranted skepticism' arising from institutional betrayal (Dentith, 2016; Goldenberg, 2021).

7.1 The Identity-based Type (John)

The first type I provisionally call the "diehard." For the diehard, their belief is a firm part of how they read the world, and it may stem, for example, from simple trust in their own sensory experience, which they have elevated above abstract models. Let me illustrate with an example: imagine John believes in the flat Earth model – he "sees" that the horizon is flat and that it is the Sun that moves, not the Earth. If we approach John and attempt to convince him of heliocentrism, he may not doubt his opinion at all. Instead, he doubts us – or more precisely, our intentions. He asks himself: "Why does this person want to convince me of something that is obviously untrue? What are they after? What are their real intentions?"

With John, we encounter the phenomenon of epistemic resistance. Our attempt to persuade him quickly activates suspicion that we are messengers of manipulation. John then explains our actions using a conspiracy narrative that makes sense to him (e.g., "They want to control all people on Earth under a fictional threat of attack from outside"). The solution in John's case is not "more facts," because they only deepen his suspicion of our bad intentions. The path to him is only through basic human respect and building a relationship on topics unrelated to his "truth."

7.2 The Reactive Type (Robert)

The second type I call "reactive." The meaning of this type will be clarified with the example of Robert. Robert is not a dogmatist. He is a citizen who originally trusted the system – he followed the news, went to vote, and so on. The turning point came from his own experience. He repeatedly witnessed discrepancies between the words and actions of elites. He saw politicians lie without being held accountable, perceived chaos in crisis management, and so forth. At some point, Robert's cup overflowed. His distrust is not irrational delusion, but a reaction to the failure of those to whom he gave his trust.

We can speak here of a poisoned well: if Robert has evaluated mainstream sources as untrustworthy (because they disappointed him), it is logical that he seeks truth elsewhere. His distrust is in a sense a Bayesian rational updating of belief – if new negative evidence about the reliability of elites arrives, the level of trust decreases. Naturally, individual variables, mentioned earlier in section 4, play a significant role in the change of beliefs.

7.3 The Risk of Homogenization

The greatest mistake in current discourse is the use of dismissive labels for all bearers of conspiracy beliefs. Such labels burn bridges with both types, though through different mechanisms.

For the Identity-based type (John), the label confirms his existing suspicion of the critic's bad intentions. In his interpretive framework, it becomes evidence that those who want to "re-

educate" him are part of a hostile system. The contempt he perceives in this label paradoxically reinforces his conspiracy identity.

For the reactive type (Robert), the same label acts on the already open wound of lost trust. A person with legitimate questions based on observing real failures is suddenly thrown into the same bag as dogmatists. This devaluation of his experience deepens his conviction about elite arrogance and makes impossible the dialogue that might still lead to restoring trust.

The labeling strategy thus strengthens in both cases exactly what it seeks to prevent – it closes John's world of conspiracy identity and pushes Robert deeper into distrust of the system. Homogenization ignores that each type requires a fundamentally different approach, and universal contempt destroys the possibilities for meaningful intervention.

8. Conclusion: An Open Question

Mass inclination toward conspiracy narratives is not a manifestation of collective stupidity or psychological disorder. It is a symptom that the fabric woven from trust and control is steadily unraveling.

The solution is not more control – censorship, fact-checking campaigns, or technocratic interventions. These only confirm the suspicion that power is arrogant and detached from the lives of ordinary people. The real starting point is the restoration of basic human respect – and this must be differentiated according to the two types I have distinguished.

Toward the disappointed (reactive type), this means acknowledging that their loss of trust is not irrational delusion, but a legitimate reaction to repeated lies by politicians and bureaucratic opacity, which creates an insurmountable distance between citizen and power. These individual conditions – education, social status, personal experience with fraud or chaos in crisis management – are not cognitive "deficits." They are real factors that determine whether we can still trust the system. For the disappointed, therefore, "better communication" or feigned empathy is not enough. Genuine discussion and political accountability for power failures are necessary.

Toward the diehard (Identity-based type), respect does not mean agreeing that the Earth is flat or that we are ruled by lizards. It means ceasing to regard him with contempt and returning to basic humanity. Sitting at the same table with him and accepting him as a person who – like us – cares about substantially more important things than the shape of the Earth. Only in such an atmosphere of acceptance can his convulsive clinging to conspiracy identity gradually loosen.

As long as elites and media approach citizens from a position of moral superiority and ignore these individual and systemic factors, bridges will continue to burn. If we want the survival instinct to stop seeking refuge in conspiracy narratives, one condition is that we must stop marginalizing people and start taking them seriously – as equal partners who may have lost trust for comprehensible reasons.

Thus remains an open, disturbing question: is today's system even capable of returning to such a level of respect and trust that would enable functioning democracy again – or are we already too deep in a pseudo-democracy of permanent control and contempt?

This paper was supported by the Science Grant Agency VEGA (2/0118/24)

List of sources used

ABALAKINA-PAAP, M.; W. STEPHAN; T. CRAIG and L. GREGORY, (1999). Beliefs in conspiracies. Political Psychology, vol. 20 (1999), no. 3, pp. 637-647.

ACTON, J., (1887). The history of freedom and other essays. London: Macmillan, 1887.

CASSAM, Q., (2019). Conspiracy theories. Cambridge: Polity, 2019.

CISLAK, A.; A. CICHOCKA; A. D. WOJCIK and N. FRANKOWSKA, (2018). Power corrupts, but control does not: What stands behind the effects of holding high positions. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, vol. 44 (2018), no. 6, pp. 944-957.

DENTITH, M. R. X., (2016). When inferring to a conspiracy might be the best explanation. Social Epistemology, vol. 30 (2016), no. 5-6, pp. 572-591.

DOUGLAS, K. M.; R. M. SUTTON and A. CICHOCKA, (2017). The psychology of conspiracy theories. Current Directions in Psychological Science, vol. 26 (2017), no. 6, pp. 538-542.

DOUGLAS, K. M.; R. M. SUTTON; M. J. CALLAN; R. J. DAWTRY and A. J. HARVEY, (2016). Someone is pulling the strings: Hypersensitive agency detection and belief in conspiracy theories. Thinking & Reasoning, vol. 22 (2016), no. 1, pp. 57-77.

FRICKER, M., (2007). Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

GOERTZEL, T., (1994). Belief in conspiracy theories. Political Psychology, vol. 15 (1994), no. 4, pp. 731-742.

GOLDENBERG, M. J., (2021). Vaccine hesitancy: Public trust, expertise, and the war on science. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021.

HOBBES, T., (1651). Leviathan, or, The matter, forme and power of a common-wealth ecclesiasticall and civill. London: Andrew Crooke, 1651.

HOFSTADTER, R., (1964). The paranoid style in American politics. Harper's Magazine, November 1964.

KRUGLANSKI, A. W., (2004). The psychology of closed mindedness. New York: Psychology Press, 2004.

LEMAN, P. J. and M. CINNIRELLA, (2013). Beliefs in conspiracy theories and the need for cognitive closure. Frontiers in Psychology, vol. 4 (2013), p. 378.

MICHELS, R., (1915). Political parties: A sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy. New York: Hearst's International Library, 1915.

QUINE, W. V. O., (1951). Two dogmas of empiricism. The Philosophical Review, vol. 60 (1951), no. 1, pp. 20-43.

SUNSTEIN, C. R. and A. VERMEULE, (2009). Conspiracy theories: Causes and cures. Journal of Political Philosophy, vol. 17 (2009), no. 2, pp. 202-227.

TVRDÝ, F., (2022). Bída racionální iracionality: případ konspiračních teorií [The Poverty of Rational Irrationality: The Case of Conspiracy Theories]. Filozofia, vol. 77 (2022), no. 10, pp. 743-755.

USCINSKI, J. E. and J. M. PARENT, (2014). American conspiracy theories. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

WITTGENSTEIN, L., (1969). On certainty. G. E. M. ANSCOMBE and G. H. von WRIGHT (eds.); D. PAUL and G. E. M. ANSCOMBE (trans.). Oxford: Blackwell, 1969.

YLÄ-ANTTILA, T., (2018). Populist knowledge: 'Post-truth', repertoires of contestation and the uses of counter-knowledge. European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology, vol. 5 (2018), no. 4, pp. 356-388.

Author

Tomáš Kollárik
tomas.kollarik@savba.sk

Department of Normativity and Human Rights Research, Institute of Philosophy,
Slovak Academy of Sciences, v. v. i., Bratislava
Klemensova 19
811 09 Bratislava 1
Slovak Republic

Tomáš Kollárik studied philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy of Comenius University in Bratislava, where he obtained his PhD. His research focuses on the theory of argumentation, autonomy, and questions of rationality in public discourse. He works as a researcher at the Department of Normativity and Human Rights Research at the Institute of Philosophy of the

Slovak Academy of Sciences, v.v.i., and is engaged in analytical philosophy, critical thinking, and epistemic problems of polarization.