

A Climate for Conspiracy

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I am writing this article knowing full well that it will be used as evidence against me—evidence that I have been duped by a powerful cabal, a vast conspiracy to . . . to do what? Well, take your choice. Perhaps to convince a naive public that NASA landed men on the moon? Or to hide the fact that our President is African? Or the fact that al Qaeda didn't mastermind 9/11? Or to falsely link HIV with AIDS, or smoking with lung cancer?

Conspiracy theorists have sounded alarms about every one of these nefarious plots and more, and many conspiracy theorists embrace several imaginary plots. None of these claims has ever been proven. Proof is not conspiracy theorists' strong suit. Indeed they tend to be highly suspicious of science and its methods, which is why, whenever conspiracy theorists are confronted with facts that refute their wild ideas, they simply seize on those facts as further evidence of plotters' ingenuity.

Psychological scientists are very interested in this particular brand of irrational thinking—especially the link between conspiratorial thinking and anti-science world views. These plots and conspiracies may seem laughable at first glance, but they are not inconsequential. At the very least, conspiracy theorists waste a lot of time and money—think of the “birthers”—and at worst, they pose real dangers to society. Just think of how many parents, alarmed by the bogus link between vaccines and autism, have left their children unprotected against serious disease.

Or consider global warming. More than 90 percent of climate scientists agree that the global climate is shifting, largely as a result of human activity. Scientifically, this is essentially a closed case. Yet conspiracy theorists continue to spin wild tales of government agents surreptitiously destroying thermometers and burying contradictory evidence. What are the motives of these climate deniers, who reject even overwhelming scientific consensus? Do they have a specific agenda having to do with the environment or economics, or are climate deniers the same people who fantasize about the second gunman on the grassy knoll?

Cognitive psychologist Stephan Lewandowsky of the University of Western Australia has been studying climate deniers and conspiratorial thinking—and the link between the two. He suspected that climate deniers—as opposed to climate “skeptics,” who actually use the tools of science to verify facts—are highly prone to unrelated kinds of conspiracy thinking, and also to a conservative, pro-business ideology. He decided to test these ideas by questioning people who write and read blogs related to global warming.

He chose blogs because people with an anti-science bias have found a welcoming home on the Internet. Science denial is difficult to practice in the mainstream, peer-reviewed literature, but such contrarian views can be freely expressed in the blogosphere, where conspiracy theorists can feed one another's feelings of persecution. Lewandowsky surveyed blog denizens about their views on climate science, other scientific propositions, and their environmental leanings; their perceptions of what scientific “consensus” means; their beliefs about free-market economics; and finally, their views on a number of

well-known conspiracy theories. The conspiracies covered the political spectrum, from fears of a World Government (a right-wing idea) to the belief that 9/11 was an “inside job” (typically embraced on the left).

The results were unambiguous, and unsettling. First, those who hold a laissez-faire view of unfettered free markets were much more likely to strongly reject climate science. Lewandowsky believes that, because the fundamental importance of fossil fuels (and CO₂ emissions) to modern economics, climate science in general (and evidence for global warming in particular) is a threat to free market advocates. Free marketers were also more likely to reject other established scientific findings, even the (undisputed) facts that smoking causes lung cancer and HIV causes AIDS.

Second, conspiracy thinking was clearly linked to climate denial—and to the rejection of scientific propositions in general. This was true even of conspiracy theories unrelated to the environment or climate—the belief that NASA staged the moon landing, for example, or that the CIA killed Martin Luther King. In other words, conspiracy thinking is not simply a convenient way to dismiss a particularly bothersome scientific consensus. Instead, some people seem to have a general personality trait or cognitive style, which leads them to endorse any conspiracy. This paranoid thinking in turn predisposes them to reject completely unrelated scientific facts.

Lewandowsky’s study will be published in a future issue of *Psychological Science*, a peer-reviewed scientific journal, providing further evidence of a vast and ingenious plot to elevate enlightenment thinking and marginalize the unenlightened.

Wray Herbert’s book, *On Second Thought*, is about irrational thinking. Excerpts from his two blogs—“We’re Only Thinking” and “Full Frontal Psychology”—appear regularly in [The Huffington Post](#) and in *Scientific American Mind*.