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## CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND STYLIZED FACTS<sup>1</sup>

Kurtis Hagen

### **Abstract**

In an article published in the *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule argue that the government and its allies ought to actively undermine groups that espouse conspiracy theories deemed “demonstrably false.” They propose infiltrating such groups in order to “cure” conspiracy theorists by treating their “crippled epistemology” with “cognitive diversity.” They base their proposal on an analysis of the “causes” of such conspiracy theories, which emphasizes informational and reputational cascades. Some may regard their proposal as outrageous and anti-democratic. I agree. However, in this article I merely argue that their argument is flawed in at least the following ways: (1) their account of the popularity of conspiracy theories is implausible, and (2) their proposal relies on misleading “stylized facts,” including a caricature of those who doubt official narratives and a deceptive depiction of the relevant history.

### **Introduction**

In an article entitled “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures,” published in the *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule have argued that the government and its allies ought to counter “conspiracy theories” or “extreme views” by infiltrating and undermining the groups that espouse them. While they specify that this would apply only to theories that are (or are *deemed to be*) “demonstrably false,” they give no hint regarding how such a judgment is to be reached. I will argue that Sunstein and Vermeule’s proposal is not well supported. Among other problems, their account of the “causes,” which purportedly explain the popularity of (supposedly) “demonstrably false” conspiracy theories, is premised on a caricature of those who doubt official narratives. Moreover, the air of acceptability that they attempt to evoke regarding their proposed “cures” relies on a deceptive depiction of the relevant history. To use their own terminology, their argument is based on misleading “stylized facts” (described below).

Before I begin my critique, I should say something about Sunstein and Vermeule. At the time the final version of their paper was published, they were

both Harvard law professors. Sunstein had just moved from the University of Chicago to Harvard, and shortly thereafter he was chosen by President Obama to head the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, in which capacity he now serves. He is reputed to be “the most cited law professor on any faculty in the United States” according to a White House website, and “one of America’s leading constitutional scholars” according to Obama himself.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, according to Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan, “Cass Sunstein is the pre-eminent legal scholar of our time—the most wide-ranging, the most prolific, the most cited, and the most influential” (Mangan 2008). So, although some people may regard their proposal as too outrageous to merit rebuttal, I agree with Sunstein and Vermeule on one thing: problematic views ought to be confronted, not ignored. And so, particularly given Sunstein’s acclaim and position, it is worth explicitly detailing at least some of the falsities and fallacies on which their proposal is based.<sup>4</sup>

### Conspiracy Theories

Sunstein and Vermeule define a conspiracy theory as “*an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)*” (2009, 205). It is worth noting that by this definition Saddam Hussein’s purported attempt to conceal the weapons of mass destruction he supposedly had counts as a conspiracy theory.<sup>5</sup> (Were he and his supposed co-conspirators not powerful people?) But of course “conspiracy theory” is not typically employed to describe such official accusations. So Sunstein and Vermeule’s definition does not well capture the actual scope of this phrase in ordinary usage. Roughly following the philosopher Charles Pigden, I think a more accurate description of what is generally called a “conspiracy theory” is: an interpretation of an historical event that runs counter to an “official story,” and suggests that elements within a Western government have behaved in ways that seem particularly egregious. In any case, my critique of Sunstein and Vermeule’s proposal does not depend on any particular or precise definition of the phrase.

There has actually been a fair amount of scholarly work on the philosophy of conspiracy theories in the last several years, most notably: a collection of essays in a book entitled *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate* (2006), and an issue of the journal *Episteme* (4.2, 2007) that was dedicated to that topic. The bottom line of this work, as I read it, is that *all attempts to explain why “conspiracy theories” (or a definable subset thereof) ought to be dismissed have turned out to be failures.* (Sunstein and Vermeule’s attempt in this regard is a

failure as well, as my discussion of reputational and informational cascades below shows.) This should not really be surprising, since all sides admit that at least some significant conspiracy theories have turned out to be true. Watergate and Iran-contra are usually cited, but there are many more as well. For instance, the Bush administration’s coordinated propagandistic efforts to win support for an invasion of Iraq was a conspiracy.<sup>6</sup> And those who called it what it was early on were promoting a conspiracy theory, by most definitions. (Alas, if only that conspiracy theory had been more successful, much suffering and death may have been avoided.) In addition, as U.C. Davis History Professor Kathryn S. Olmsted explains:

[A]s the [U.S.] government grew, it gained the power to conspire against its citizens, and it soon began exercising that power. By the height of the cold war, government agents had consorted with mobsters to kill a foreign leader, dropped hallucinogenic drugs into the drinks of unsuspecting Americans in random bars, and considered launching fake terrorist attacks on Americans in the United States. Public officials had denied potentially life-saving treatment to African American men in medical experiments, sold arms to terrorists in return for American hostages, and faked documents to frame past presidents for crimes they had not committed. (Olmsted 2009, 8)

There are also scores of conspiracy theories that remain plausible, yet unproven—or at least not widely accepted as proven. Many of these may well be true too, for all we know.

### Causes: Informational and Reputational Cascades

Sunstein and Vermeule’s major innovation are (1) the suggestion that what accounts for the success of conspiracy theories deemed to be “demonstrably false” are informational and reputational cascades, and (2) the proposed “cure,” cognitive infiltration, which is designed to disrupt these cascades. But these cascades are implausible explanations for the success of conspiracy theories, especially for the set of conspiracy theories that they take as their “running example,” namely conspiracy theories about September 11.

### Informational Cascades

Sunstein and Vermeule argue that informational cascades, in significant measure, explain the pervasiveness of “demonstrably false” conspiracy theories. I will quote them at length to show how easily such cascades can be applied to explain the success of (dubious) official stories as well. It is not a phenomenon that has any *particular* relation to conspiracy theories. I have simply changed references to conspiracy theories into references to official stories, as indicated

by brackets and strikethrough lettering. (Note that so-called “informational cascades” do not actually involve cascades of *information*, or evidence, but rather cascades of opinion.)

To see how informational cascades work, imagine a group of people who are trying to assign responsibility for some loss of life. Assume that the group members are announcing their views in sequence. Each member attends, reasonably enough, to the judgments of others. Andrews is the first to speak. He suggests that the event was caused [just how the government said it was] ~~by a conspiracy of powerful people~~. Barnes now knows Andrews’s judgment; she should certainly go along with Andrew’s account if she agrees independently with him. But if her independent judgment is otherwise, she would—if she trusts Andrews no more and no less than she trusts herself—be indifferent about what to do, and she might simply flip a coin.

Now turn to a third person, Charleton. Suppose that both Andrews and Barnes have endorsed the [official story] ~~conspiracy theory~~, but that Charleton’s own view, based on limited information, suggests that they are probably wrong. In that event, Charleton might well ignore what he knows and follow Andrews and Barnes. It is likely, after all, that both Andrews and Barnes had evidence for their conclusion, and unless Charleton thinks that his own information is better than theirs, he should follow their lead. If he does, Charleton is in a cascade. Of course Charleton will resist if he has sufficient grounds to think that Andrews and Barnes are being foolish. But if he lacks those grounds, he is likely to go along with them. This may happen even if Andrews initially speculated in a way that does not fit the facts. That initial speculation, in this example, can start a process by which a number of people are led to participate in a cascade, accepting [an official story] ~~a conspiracy theory~~ whose factual foundations are fragile. (2009, 213-214)<sup>7</sup>

Not only can these cascades work, in hypothetical cases, either for a counter-narrative or for an official story, they make more sense as an explanation for the success of dubious official stories, since official stories tend to have the crucial advantage of gaining early traction.

Sunstein and Vermeule are not actually the first to suggest that informational cascades are relevant to conspiracy theories. In a paper entitled “Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational?” David Coady describes informational cascades in a context wherein it is the conspiracy theorists who are accused of (perhaps irrationally) exercising “intellectual autonomy” by *refusing* to go along with informational cascades. Keeping that context in mind, consider Coady’s rather neutral description:

[W]hat economists call “information cascades”...can occur when people express their opinions about the answer to a certain question in a publicly observable sequence. If the early answers exhibit a clear pattern, people later in the sequence may decide to ignore

their own epistemic resources and follow the crowd. This belief forming strategy can be entirely rational from an individual perspective, especially if expertise on the question at issue is reasonably evenly spread amongst the group. The epistemic danger of this strategy, however, is that it can lead to relevant evidence being hidden from those later in the sequence. Thus the epistemic authority of thousands of people can be largely illusory, because most of them have had their beliefs determined by a handful of people at the beginning of the sequence. (Coady 2007, 201-202)

Coady concludes that while it may be “individually rational” to go with the flow of an information cascade, “those who refuse to follow the crowd, even when the crowd is more likely to be right than they are, are doing the crowd an epistemic favour by making it more likely that the crowd itself (or at least most of its members) gets the right answer in the end” (Coady 2007, 202). It is worth noticing, in this context, that doubters of the official narrative of September 11 often point out how quickly an official narrative took form. Even if not explicitly mentioning “informational cascades” by name, they clearly imply that setting up such cascades is a propaganda device that was employed very early on.<sup>8</sup>

The point is this: while the dynamic that Sunstein and Vermeule describe is undoubtedly real, it cuts both ways. Indeed, it works better as an explanation for the success of questionable official stories. Regarding September 11, some rather strong informational cascades (whether based on accurate information or not) affirming the official story began flowing within the first couple days, and have continued unabated. Counter-currents, on the other hand, didn’t start flowing with any strength for several years. And, as we will see at the end of this article, many of those skeptical of the official story of 9/11 cannot plausibly be regarded as uncritically following an informational cascade. Further, regardless of what peculiar informational cascades might flow through a particular group or segment within society, it is a rare individual indeed that would have escaped the mainstream media and their relentless support of the official story. At most, a counter-cascade could have emboldened some to question the official story, and perhaps to begin to investigate the issue. But it is hardly plausible that a counter-narrative informational cascade would overwhelm the official/mainstream informational flood—unless it drew strength in some other way, perhaps from empirical evidence.<sup>9</sup> (Whether such evidence is truly substantial cannot be adjudicated *a priori*, but must be carefully examined.)

### Reputational Cascades

When it comes to reputational cascades, Sunstein and Vermeule’s theory is even less plausible. They describe such cascades as follows:

Conspiracy theories do not take hold only because of information. Sometimes people profess belief in a conspiracy theory, or at least suppress their doubts, because they seek to curry favor. Reputational pressures help account for conspiracy theories, and they feed conspiracy cascades. In a reputational cascade, people think that they know what is right, or what is likely to be right, but they nonetheless go along with the crowd in order to maintain the good opinion of others.

Suppose that Albert suggests that the Central Intelligence Agency was responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy, and that Barbara concurs with Albert, not because she actually thinks that Albert is right, but because she does not wish to seem, to Albert, to be some kind of dupe. It should be easy to see how this process might generate a cascade. Once Albert, Barbara, and Cynthia offer a united front on the issue, their friend David might be reluctant to contradict them even if he believes that they are wrong. In real-world conspiracy theories, reputational pressures often play a large role, leading people to squelch their own doubts in order to avoid social sanctions. (2009, 214-215)

While their example is hypothetical, Sunstein and Vermeule assert that such reputational cascades “often play a large role” in “real-world conspiracy theories.” So, let’s look at the real world.

Consider the case of Professor Woodward of the University of New Hampshire. According to an article in the Boston Globe: “[William] Woodward, a professor of the history of psychology, is a member of Scholars For 9/11 Truth.... When news of Woodward’s association with the group was published in a local newspaper last month, it sparked a hail of criticism from New Hampshire politicians.”<sup>10</sup> In another article, James Joyner describes the situation as follows: “A student activist group has joined New Hampshire Governor John Lynch in trying to fire a University of New Hampshire professor for his rather bizarre views on the 9/11 attacks.... Gov. John Lynch called Woodward’s beliefs ‘completely crazy and offensive’ and asked the trustees to investigate.”<sup>11</sup> In an update to that article, Joyner writes: “[A reader] comments, ‘I don’t think they should fire him. I think they should ridicule him. Publicly. Relentlessly.’ Agreed. That is much more in the spirit of higher education than censorship.” Now, does this sound like an environment wherein a reputational cascade can plausibly account for the spread of the theory in question? I don’t think so. Further, I can personally attest, as an untenured assistant professor, that if I were basing my decision on enhancing, or at least not tarnishing, my reputation with my colleagues, advocating “9/11 Truth” would be just about the last thing I would do. Indeed, I have spoken my views on this matter with considerable hesitation, and despite the negative effect on my reputation that doing so risks.

Although some people doubted the official story from the beginning, it seems that, at least for a while, they mostly kept it to themselves.<sup>12</sup> In any case, the 9/11 Truth Movement didn’t really start to take off until around 2005 or 2006. By then, informational and reputational cascades were flowing powerfully in support of the official story. In this context, appeal to such cascades as the explanation for the growing pervasiveness of 9/11 conspiracy theories is unpersuasive.

### Cure: Cognitive Infiltration

For whatever reason, conspiracy theories, such as those positing insider complicity in 9/11, are becoming more popular. So, what should be done about this? Sunstein and Vermeule think that we can separate plausible conspiracy theories from “demonstrably false” ones. They imagine an alarming range of possible government responses to those conspiracy theories deemed (by someone) to be “demonstrably false.” They write:

What can the government do about conspiracy theories, and what should it do? (1) Government might ban “conspiracy theories,” somehow defined. (2) Government might impose some kind of tax, financial or otherwise, on those who disseminate such theories. (3) Government might itself engage in counterspeech, marshaling arguments to discredit conspiracy theories.<sup>13</sup> (4) Government might formally hire credible private parties to engage in counterspeech. (5) Government might engage in informal communication with such parties, encouraging them to help. Each instrument has a distinctive set of potential effects, or costs and benefits, and each will have a place under imaginable conditions. Our main policy claim here is that government should engage in cognitive infiltration of the groups that produce conspiracy theories, which involves a mix of (3), (4), and (5). (2009, 218)

As an example of a set of theories that are “demonstrably false,” Sunstein and Vermeule single out counter-narratives regarding the events of September 11, 2001. However, they neither provide a comprehensive proof of this falsity (granted, that would be unreasonable to expect of them) nor do they *point* to such a comprehensive demonstration (a more reasonable expectation). They do provide a limited critique of their own, but not one that inspires confidence in their conclusion, or in their thoroughness or impartiality. Their characterization of the significance of frames of video footage released by the Department of Defense, which I will discuss below, is an example.

In addition to the problem of misdiagnosis, their proposed cure has potentially dangerous side effects. By suggesting that groups who promote views they deem to be demonstrably false ought to be infiltrated, they are implicitly suggesting that

members of those groups, or others who hold similar views (including me), are not fully persons—in the Kantian sense of being autonomous rational agents who are thus ends-in-themselves. There is an analogy between Sunstein and Vermeule's proposed infiltrations and the policy toward detainees instituted during George W. Bush's administration. By condoning harsh interrogations, stress positions, and such, the Bush administration set the conditions in which abuse was a predictable result.<sup>14</sup> This is one of the many reasons that these policies were ill-advised, and that the administration bears considerable responsibility for the abuses that occurred—even though the official policy did not, of course, explicitly authorize turning detainees into naked human pyramids, or torturing them to death, or sodomizing them with broomsticks, and so on. How did these outrages happen? Dehumanization. Once someone is regarded as less than fully human, it is hard to avoid a feeling of contempt. And, contempt plus power, or at least the sense that one is working in the service of Authority, leads quickly to abuse, as the Stanford Prison Experiment so clearly showed.

Now, how does Sunstein and Vermeule's proposal compare? As suggested above, Sunstein and Vermeule's proposal treats "conspiracy theorists" as less than fully human in the sense that they are regarded as irrational<sup>15</sup>—rationality being the hallmark of humanity. Although this is based on a caricature of conspiracy theorists (which will be shown below), it is a necessary assumption for two reasons. First, the supposition that they believe "demonstrably false" theories suggests contemptible ignorance or stupidity. Second, positing irrationality justifies the notion that one must lie about one's identity, since conspiracy theorists are viewed as incapable of evaluating evidence that does not come from their kind. In addition, implicit in the proposal to actively undermine selected groups based on the beliefs they hold and promote is the notion that those groups do not really have a right to free speech and assembly. To suggest that they are without such a basic right is to suggest that they are less than human. But once individuals are viewed in this way, it is hard to restrain agents from exceeding their explicit mandates in their effort to please their superiors. Thus, here too, abuse is to be expected. And, as discussed below, infiltration has a history, which isn't pretty. This analysis, that abuse can reasonably be expected to follow if such infiltrations are permitted, holds regardless of whether we grant Sunstein and Vermeule's (unsafe) assumption of a well-motivated executive.

In addition to having dangerous implications, the "conspiracy theorists" that their proposal targets would naturally regard the proposal as straightforwardly insulting. But one ought not object because of the insult. After all, sometimes the truth hurts. The objection that I press in the following section is precisely

that they have not expressed the truth. Their proposal relies on clearly false premises and misleadingly stylized facts.

### Stylized Facts

Sunstein and Vermeule argue that conspiracy theorists suffer from a "crippled epistemology" as a result of their informational isolation, and thus they need "cognitive diversity" introduced by infiltrating agents able to reframe their "stylized facts." Sunstein and Vermeule write,

[W]e suggest a distinctive tactic for breaking up the hard core of extremists who supply conspiracy theories: cognitive infiltration of extremist groups, whereby government agents or their allies (acting either virtually or in real space, and either openly or anonymously) will undermine the crippled epistemology of believers by planting doubts about the theories and stylized facts that circulate within such groups, thereby introducing beneficial cognitive diversity. (2009, 219)

Let's discuss stylized facts. Not always negative in connotation, a "stylized fact" can mean: a general claim that is widely accepted as true as a result of its (supposed) instantiation in a wide variety of contexts. Its presumed truth, then, serves to limit interpretations of phenomena. For example, the idea that conspiracy theories are unwarranted is a stylized fact in this sense. The common refrain, "I don't subscribe to conspiracy theories," suggests, as a general "fact," that conspiracy theories are always unwarranted, and that assumption (inappropriately) closes off the possibility of serious consideration of certain interpretations of events. Relatedly, "stylized fact" can refer to a simplified expression, or summary, of an empirical reality, which, being simplified, misses some (possibly significant) nuances. For example, Sunstein and Vermeule's presumption of a "well motivated" government, which they characterize as a "standard" assumption, may count as a stylized fact in both of the above senses. Is it *true* that the government is well motivated? Well, there may be *some* truth in the claim that it is, but that generalization glosses over some rather rough spots that may well be very significant indeed. (Was the Tuskegee Experiment "well motivated"?) And, the assumption closes off certain perfectly reasonable lines of inquiry.

Sunstein and Vermeule offer no explicit example of conspiracy theorists relying on specific stylized facts, so it is hard to know exactly what they are thinking of. Nevertheless, since circulating these (unstated) stylized facts is apparently taken to be an epistemic sin sufficient to justify government infiltration, I take the phrase to be intended in a negative sense. I will, rather

loosely, treat it as meaning simply “a misleading characterization of reality.” This is in keeping with Sunstein and Vermeule’s emphasis on conspiracy theories being grounded in misinformation or misleadingly incomplete information.

While it is no doubt true that so-called “conspiracy theorists” sometimes do stylize facts, Sunstein and Vermeule neither provide evidence that the conspiracy theories that they are most concerned about critically depend upon stylized facts, nor even that conspiracy theorists employ stylized facts any more than supporters of official theories do. But it is clear that Sunstein and Vermeule themselves rely significantly on misleadingly stylized facts. I will discuss four. (In this part of my discussion I will not restrict myself to the version of Sunstein and Vermeule’s article that was published in the *Journal of Political Philosophy*, but will include examples from an earlier version of their paper published on-line. I think this is fair because the issue is their own tendency to stylize facts, not whether the peer review process ferreted out all such significantly misleading “facts”—which we will see it did not.)

### Stylized Fact 1: Conspiracy Theories are the Stuff of Rumor

Operation Northwoods was a Kennedy-era plan that was brought to light by NSA expert James Bamford in 2001, in his book *Body of Secrets*. Bamford explains:

[T]he plan, which had the written approval of the Chairman and every member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called for innocent people to be shot on American streets; for boats carrying refugees fleeing Cuba to be sunk on the high seas; for a wave of violent terrorism to be launched in Washington, D.C., Miami, and elsewhere. People would be framed for bombings they did not commit; planes would be hijacked. Using phony evidence, all of it would be blamed on Castro, thus giving Lemnitzer and his cabal the excuse, as well as the public and international backing, they needed to launch their war. (Bamford 2001, 82)

Now, Sunstein and Vermeule characterize Operation Northwoods as “a *rumored* plan by the Department of Defense to *simulate* acts of terrorism and to blame them on Cuba” (2009, 206, emphasis added). But there is nothing “rumored” about the document uncovered by Bamford detailing a variety of plans approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which, Sunstein and Vermeule admit, “really was proposed by high-level officials.” So, why do they style it as “rumored”? Clearly the intent was to downplay the significance of this shocking and relevant example. Further, the plan proposed not only to “*simulate* acts of terrorism,” but even to *actually carry out* acts of terrorism, and blame them on Cuba. It was a plan that included false flag terrorism, not unlike the acts of terrorism carried out in Italy, from the late 1960s to the early 1980’s, often referred to under the heading Operation Gladio (see Ganser 2005).

Further, the analogy to what some so-called “conspiracy theorists” allege about 9/11 is striking. The Northwoods document even details a plan to blow up an empty plane flown by remote control over Cuba. To give a sense of the level of complexity that the planners apparently considered unproblematic, I offer an extended quotation from the document:

8. It is possible to create an incident which will demonstrate convincingly that a Cuban aircraft has attacked and shot down a chartered civil airliner enroute from the United States to Jamaica, Guatemala, Panama or Venezuela. The destination would be chosen only to cause the flight plan route to cross Cuba. The passengers could be a group of college students off on a holiday or any grouping of persons with a common interest to support chartering a non-scheduled flight.
  - a. An aircraft at Eglin AFB [Air Force Base] would be painted and numbered as an exact duplicate for a civil registered aircraft belonging to a CIA proprietary organization in the Miami area. At a designated time the duplicate would be substituted for the actual civil aircraft and would be loaded with the selected passengers, all boarded under carefully prepared aliases. The actual registered aircraft would be converted to a drone.
  - b. Take off times of the drone aircraft and the actual aircraft will be scheduled to allow a rendezvous south of Florida. From the rendezvous point the passenger-carrying aircraft will descend to minimum altitude and go directly into an auxiliary field at Eglin AFB where arrangements will have to be made to evacuate the passengers and return the aircraft to its original status. The drone aircraft meanwhile will continue to fly the filed flight plan. When over Cuba the drone will be transmitting on the international distress frequency a “MAY DAY” message stating he is under attack by Cuban MIG aircraft. The transmission will be interrupted by destruction of the aircraft which will be triggered by radio signal. This will allow ICAO radio stations in the Western Hemisphere to tell the US what has happened to the aircraft instead of the US trying to “sell” the incident.<sup>16</sup>

Now back to Sunstein and Vermeule’s dismissive language. Their choice of words cannot be written off as a mere oversight on their part. For when we read the draft version of this paragraph, published on-line, their deliberate intent to be dismissive becomes unambiguously apparent. Immediately after the mention of Operation Northwoods they write: “In 1947, space aliens did, in fact, land in Roswell, New Mexico, and the government covered it all up. (Well, maybe not)” (2008, 4). This trivializes a whole list of significant conspiracies that they could not but admit were real, though the list could have been much longer.

### **Stylized Fact 2: Clear Evidence Proves Conspiracy Theories False**

In the on-line draft for their paper, Sunstein and Vermeule write: “Some theorists claimed that no plane had hit the pentagon; *even after the Department of Defense released video frames showing Flight 77 approaching the building....*” (2008, 20, emphasis added). If Sunstein and Vermeule had bothered to actually look at the video frames in question, they would have seen that they do not in fact show anything recognizable as Flight 77 approaching the Pentagon. Indeed, it is not at all clear what these pictures show. Apparently, either Sunstein and Vermeule were just too busy advocating infiltration to objectively scrutinize the evidence or else they were “stylizing” their facts.

To be clear, my own view is that this part of the official story of 9/11—that Flight 77 hit the Pentagon—is probably true, but it is far from clearly demonstrated. Indeed, legitimate questions remain. Further, there are other aspects of the official story that I am convinced are false—and the implications are quite troubling. Each person can make his or her own judgment on these matters—though I would hope that they do so only after consulting evidence, rather than being swept along by a cascade. In any case, it is positively chilling to think that, if I sought to meet with likeminded individuals, our group could be targeted for infiltration, if Sunstein and Vermeule get their way. Further, it adds insult<sup>17</sup> to injury for them to use “evidence” as useless as the supposed pictures of Flight 77 approaching the Pentagon to “demonstrate” the falseness of alternative views, and thereby justify their deceit-countenancing, anti-democratic, and epistemically suspect proposal.<sup>18</sup>

### **Stylized Fact 3: Infiltration is Benign**

Sunstein and Vermeule write:

By [cognitive infiltration of extremist groups] we do not mean 1960s-style infiltration with a view to surveillance and collecting information, possibly for use in future prosecutions. Rather, we mean that government efforts might succeed in weakening or even breaking up the epistemological complexes that constitute these networks and groups. (2009, 224)

This gives the impression that the COINTELPRO operations of the fifties and sixties were benign and passive. But this is far from accurate. Kathryn Olmsted gives a much more honest account:

During the cold war, the FBI started its domestic covert action programs, known by the acronym COINTELPRO, in which agents infiltrated dissident groups and eventually tried to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” them. The FBI

did not just monitor these individuals, but tried to break up their marriages, “seed mistrust, sow misinformation,” and provoke them to commit crimes so that they could be arrested. (Olmsted 2009, 10)<sup>19</sup>

Further, Olmsted adds:

Government officials tried to control how the public interpreted events, sometimes lied about these events, and spied on and harassed those citizens who suggested different interpretations.

Had Sunstein and Vermeule given a fuller and more accurate account of the true history of past practices it would have aroused a sense that great caution is warranted here. So, instead they stylized.

### **Stylized Fact 4: Conspiracy Theorists are Ignorant Extremists**

Perhaps the most significant stylized fact involves the caricature of so-called “conspiracy theorists.” Sunstein and Vermeule charge that conspiracy theorists generally have “little (relevant) information” (2009, 211) or “skewed information” (2009, 210). But these claims are unsubstantiated. Indeed, many people that would count as “conspiracy theorists” by Sunstein and Vermeule’s lights are very informed people. Indeed, many have specialized knowledge of one relevant kind or another. But Sunstein and Vermeule ignore them.

For example, if all those who take the possibility of insider complicity in 9/11 seriously count, then that list includes established scholars that have employed their considerable research talents to understanding the dynamics surrounding 9/11, such as David Ray Griffin, Peter Dale Scott, Nefeez Ahmed, Graeme MacQueen, and Lance deHaven-Smith, to name just a few;<sup>20</sup> it includes established scientists such as Steven Jones, Jeffrey Farrer, Niels Harrit, and many others;<sup>21</sup> it includes professional engineers and architects—more than 1,400 have joined Richard Gage in calling for a new investigation into the collapse of the Twin Towers and Building 7;<sup>22</sup> and it includes intelligence professionals such as Ray McGovern,<sup>23</sup> Robert Steele, and (with some vacillation) Robert Baer. That is still a short list, but the complete list of highly accomplished people that have publicly questioned the official account is at least in the hundreds.<sup>24</sup> By caricaturing conspiracy theorists Sunstein and Vermeule are able to pretend that informed and sophisticated “conspiracy theorists” do not exist. But these people do exist. And Sunstein and Vermeule’s theory of the “causes” of conspiracy theories does not account for them.<sup>25</sup> And the inappropriateness of their proposed “cure” is most clear with regard to them.

Thus, in order to make their proposal palatable, Sunstein and Vermeule needed to stylize their depiction of those who question official stories. Indeed, they go to absurd lengths, worrying that their proposed infiltrators might be asked by conspiracy theorists to commit crimes. As suggested by the discussion of the previous stylized fact, it is more likely that the infiltrators will be the ones that end up proposing criminal activity—even if Sunstein and Vermeule don't explicitly advocate this.

One might counter that some conspiracy theorists, surely, really are dangerous, and may indeed engage in and encourage criminal activity. But this would be true of virtually *any* large category of people. If there are valid reasons to think that a *particular* individual, or a small group of individuals, is dangerous, that is another matter. But the fact that a group thinks that, say, 9/11 was an inside job is not, *by itself*, a valid reason to believe that they are prone to criminality or violence. Sunstein and Vermeule's caricature of conspiracy theorists conflates those who hold views that they regard as false with the much smaller group of those who *in addition* have violent or otherwise criminal proclivities.

### Conclusion

The stylization of the above "facts" is important for the plausibility of Sunstein and Vermeule's argument. (1) If they fully acknowledged the history of real conspiracies and of theories that remain plausible if unproven, that would undermine the efficacy of their dismissive rhetorical posture regarding the ill-defined subset of those theories that they believe should be undermined by covert operations. (2) By whitewashing the history of infiltration, they make their proposal seem less obviously problematic. (3) By presenting a caricature of people who espouse so-called "conspiracy theories" they treat them as "other"—something less than human, beings not fully capable of reason. Otherwise, a more honest, straightforward, and respectful response would seem more appropriate than infiltration. And, finally, (4) the bogus claim that there are pictures clearly identifiable as Flight 77 approaching the Pentagon made it possible for them to ridicule conspiracy theorists who continue to believe otherwise. Without recourse to ridicule, Sunstein and Vermeule's responsibility to deal with the relevant evidence in a more sophisticated way would have been more evident. And addressing the evidence in this way would have made establishing the falsity of all theories that suggest insider complicity in 9/11 hopelessly complex. But without establishing the clear falsity of those theories, they could not reasonably frame the members of the so-called "9/11 Truth

Movement" as irrational, and thus appropriate targets for cognitive infiltration. In the final version of their paper, Sunstein and Vermeule drop the reference to Flight 77, presumably because it is so easily exposed as false.<sup>26</sup> In the end, they didn't really need to resort to ridicule based on false evidence. The strong bias against conspiracy theories,<sup>27</sup> especially in the academy, evidentially seems to make such ridicule unnecessary.

It should have been obvious to these law professors that peaceful, law-abiding people ought to be allowed to freely assemble and pursue their inquiries without infiltration. And this applies even to those who promote theories that posit state crimes against democracy (SCADs)<sup>28</sup>—which is what the most "dangerous" so-called "conspiracy theories" typically allege. In the interest of peace and justice, all people ought to be allowed to freely assemble and pursue their inquiries without infiltration—even those, or perhaps especially those, who dare to question official narratives.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>An earlier, and significantly shorter, version of this paper was presented at the Concerned Philosophers for Peace conference, in Montreal (October 30, 2010), under the title, "Spinning a Response to Crippled Epistemologies: Cognitive Infiltration, and the Stylized Facts of Obama's Information Czar."

This paper (a version, that is, resembling the conference presentation but under the title "Conspiracy Theories and Stylized Facts") and my earlier paper on this topic, "Is Infiltration of 'Extremist Groups' Justified?" (Hagen 2010), were both denied peer review at the *Journal of Political Philosophy*, which published Sunstein and Vermeule's article.

<sup>2</sup>One wonders what Sunstein and Vermeule would have said about allegations of sexual abuse at Abu Ghraib if graphic stories of naked human pyramids, and worse, had surface and swirled before the actual pictures came out. The accusation that American soldiers were engaged in *that kind of* heinous abuse may well have counted as an extreme idea. Not all ideas branded "extreme" are false, though we don't always have pictures to clearly establish the truth.

<sup>3</sup>See "President Obama Announces Another Key OMB Post," on the White House Office of the Press Secretary web site (April 20, 2009), [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/President-Obama-Announces-Another-Key-OMB-Post/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/President-Obama-Announces-Another-Key-OMB-Post/) (Accessed on September 18, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>For a more exhaustive critique, see Griffin 2011.

<sup>5</sup>Sunstein and Vermeule acknowledge a similar conspiracy theory. They write, "[R]eal-world governments can themselves be purveyors of conspiracy theories, as when the Bush administration suggested that Saddam Hussein had conspired with Al Qaeda to support the 9/11 attacks" (2009, 219). But when accusations of conspiracy come from official stories they are not generally referred to with the dismissive term "conspiracy theory."

<sup>6</sup>Charles Lewis and Mark Reading-Smith explain, "President George W. Bush and seven of his administration's top officials, including Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, made at least 935 false statements in the two years following September 11, 2001, about the national security threat posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Nearly five years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, an exhaustive examination of the record shows that the statements were part of an orchestrated campaign that effectively galvanized public opinion and, in the process, led the nation to war under decidedly false pretenses" ("False Pretenses," Center for Public Integrity, January 23, 2008).

<sup>7</sup>Many of their claims about conspiracy theorists are true of conspiracy deniers and agnostics as well. For example: “[S]ome people who [reject] ~~accept~~ conspiracy theories are mentally ill and subject to delusions” (2009, 211). That is true too, of course. While Sunstein and Vermeule’s point here is that it is not plausible that “all or even most” conspiracy theorists are mentally ill, they make this point in such a way as to suggest there is some significant correlation.

<sup>8</sup>An example that has been cited is footage from FOX News of (ostensibly) a random bystander, a man wearing a Harley Davidson shirt, who was interviewed shortly after the towers had collapsed. The “bystander” says, “...and then I witnessed both towers collapse, one first and than the other, mostly due to structural failure because the fire was just too intense.” See “9/11: Clues you might have missed” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cycu3BvB99I>. The FOX News presentation is cut so as to reinforce the message, presenting a close-up of some flames as the young man says, “Because the fire was just too intense.” The allegation is that presenting this on the news was supposed to begin or reinforce a cascade of opinion that the towers collapsed due to fire (in addition to the damage from the plane), not from something more elaborate. Once this opinion became entrenched, most people continued to believe it, despite the discovery of significant quantities of red-grey chips in the dust that appear to be bits of unreacted nanothermite (see Harrit 2009). Or, so it could be argued.

<sup>9</sup>For a brief set of examples, see Griffin 2011, 68-70. For an exhaustive treatment of the scientific evidence relevant to the collapse of Building 7, see Griffin 2010.

<sup>10</sup>See “A Muted Response from UNH: Professors’ Right to Opinion Cited,” by Tom Long, in *The Boston Globe*, September 10, 2006.

<sup>11</sup>See “Move to Fire Professor for 9/11 Conspiracy Views,” by James Joyner, in *Outside the Beltway*, September 29, 2006. An article entitled “Another Scholar Under Fire for 9/11 Views” provides further details and a similar case: “State legislators chimed in, demanding Woodward’s dismissal and threatening to consider the issue when they next review the university’s budget. In some respects, the political reactions mirror those in Wisconsin, where lawmakers lined up to urge the University of Wisconsin at Madison to fire Kevin Barrett, who shared Woodward’s view” (*Inside Higher Ed*, August 29, 2006).

<sup>12</sup>This assessment is based on anecdotal information, from listening to various interviews of people who question the official story of September 11, corroborated by my own experience.

<sup>13</sup>I have no objection to this proposal (number 3), but Sunstein and Vermeule do not emphasize it.

<sup>14</sup>According to a report by Senators Carl Levin and John McCain, as summarized in the *New York Times*: “[T]op Bush administration officials, including Donald H. Rumsfeld, the former defense secretary, bore major responsibility for the abuses committed by American troops in interrogations at Abu Ghraib in Iraq; Guantánamo Bay, Cuba; and other military detention centers.... The abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib was ‘not simply the result of a few soldiers acting on their own’ but grew out of interrogation policies approved by Mr. Rumsfeld and other top officials, who ‘conveyed the mes-

sage that physical pressures and degradation were appropriate treatment for detainees” (See “Report Blames Rumsfeld for Detainee Abuse” by Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti, December 11, 2008.)

<sup>15</sup>Although, I claim, their proposal *treats* conspiracy theorists as irrational, strictly speaking, Sunstein and Vermeule do not *characterize* conspiracy theorists as (fully) irrational. They explain that the theories that they are concerned with are “unjustified (not in the sense of being irrationally held by those individuals who hold them, but from the standpoint of the information available in the society as a whole)” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 207). In other words, while making a contemptuous proposal they pay lip service to the (limited) rationality of conspiracy theorists. This is similar to expressing support for “maintain[ing] an open society” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, p. 218) while, as I have argued elsewhere, “their recommendations involve moving *in the direction of a more closed one*” (Hagen 2010, 160).

<sup>16</sup>Northwoods Document pp. 10-11. See Ruppert 2004, “Appendix A: Joint Chiefs of Staff ‘Northwoods’ Document” to see photocopies of the entire document.

<sup>17</sup>I indicated that conspiracy theorists should not object just because they feel insulted. But this is not primarily an insult to conspiracy theorists. It is an insult to those reading Sunstein and Vermeule’s article.

<sup>18</sup>See Hagen 2010 for my defense of the claim that their proposal is deceit-countenancing, anti-democratic, and epistemically suspect.

<sup>19</sup>Charles Pigden also describes a particularly appalling COINTELPRO practice: “Suppose the husband of a civil rights worker received [an] anonymous letter suggesting that his wife had been having an affair. The obvious explanation would be that the letter was genuine (if malicious) and had been written by a mutual acquaintance. As for the idea that the letter was a forgery planted by the FBI to undermine his marriage—well, that would be just too fantastic for words! Would the US government, or even the great but sinister J. Edgar Hoover, descend to such petty malice? The husband, like a true disciple of Occam would opt for the simpler hypothesis and institute divorce proceedings. *But in some cases the FBI mounted just such a conspiracy*” (Pigden 2006, p. 37, emphasis in original). This quotation is from an article that *should have been cited* by Sunstein and Vermeule. Mentioning Pigden’s critique of Popper’s account of conspiracy theories, Sunstein and Vermeule cite an article not found in the book they indicate. However, in that book one does find the article “Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories,” in which the above quotation appears.

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Griffin 2010, Scott 2007, Griffin and Scott 2007, Ahmed 2005, and deHaven-Smith 2010, 819.

<sup>21</sup>Relevant publications include Jones 2008, Ryan 2009, and Harrit 2009.

<sup>22</sup>See list of petition signers at <http://www2.ae911truth.org/signpetition.php>.

<sup>23</sup>On the inside cover of *9/11 and American Empire* (Griffin and Scott 2006), Ray McGovern writes, “This book...confronts the American people—indeed the people of the world as a whole—with an issue second to none in importance and urgency. I give this book, which in no way can be dismissed as the ravings of ‘paranoid conspiracy the-

orists,' my highest possible recommendation." McGovern was a high-level intelligence analyst for the CIA, and is the founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity.

<sup>24</sup>See Patriotsquestion911.com. See also Griffin 2011, pp. 29-42, for a list of several dozen accomplished professionals who question the official account of the events of September 11.

<sup>25</sup>In particular, "reputational cascades" are implausible explanations for the growing number of scholars and professionals who take counter-narratives about September 11th seriously. Further, even *informational* cascades can explain the success of dubious official stories at least as well as they can explain the success of conspiracy theories, as explained above.

<sup>26</sup>Of course, even if theories that deny Flight 77 hit the Pentagon were demonstrably false, it would not follow that all theories positing insider complicity must be false. But there may be a perceived "guilt by association."

<sup>27</sup>Charles Pigden—whom Sunstein and Vermeule cite twice (2009, 206 n15, and 208 n24)—has rightly characterized this bias against conspiracy theories as "dangerous and idiotic." He writes, "[W]hat is really wrong [is] the bland assumption...that *of course* conspiracy theories are false or foolish simply because they *are* conspiracy theories. So far from being the sophisticated view this is one of the most dangerous and idiotic ideas to disgrace our political culture" (See "Wilt Thou Conceal this Dark Conspiracy," p. 1). <http://www.otago.ac.nz/philosophy/Staff/CharlesPigden/Falsehood%20and%20folly%20.pdf>

<sup>28</sup>See deHaven-Smith 2010 for an analysis of SCADs.

## MUTILATED DREAMS: AFRICAN-BORN REFUGEES IN US SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Immaculée Harushimana

### Abstract:

This article argues that the US school system is partly to blame for the mutilated educational dreams among African-born war refugee students resettled in the United States. Feeling mistreated, unprotected, and unsupported, these students have slim chances to integrate successfully in the public school system. Evidence from research and first-hand refugee testimonies provide an insight into the factors that blockade the educational success for "multiple-stop" refugee children, that is, refugees who move from one camp to another before reaching final destination. Included among these factors are: overlooked interrupted schooling, social/peer rejection, and unmet special needs. Recommendations stress the need for a reform in school policy and administration to ensure that refugee children receive the dignity they crave and the support they need in order to progress educationally, and eventually achieve their utmost dreams.

### Introduction

"All my writing—and yours —," says Donald Murray, "is autobiographical" (207).

This piece of writing is, to a large extent, autobiographical. Reunification with my two teenage sons, after 10 years of separation, opened me to the reality of how it feels to be an adolescent refugee from Africa in the U.S. urban public school system. The tribulations I encountered monitoring the school adaptation of my children revealed how naïve I had been, and how little I knew about the school culture in America. As an educator who had spent a decent amount of time working with public schools and teachers, I never anticipated having any problems with the schooling of my own children. That was until the day I went to enroll my sons in school upon their arrival in the United States. I was speechless when an emergency summer enrollment supervisor ordered the secretary to assign my older child, a war refugee teenager, to what was reputed to be the toughest school in New York City. In vain, I pleaded for mercy by informing the aide of my child's special situation. When the supervisor was