

Conspiracies Then, Now and Tomorrow: How Do Past Instances Affect the
Likelihood of Similar Events Now?

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1 Introduction

On the Ides of March, in the year when Marcus Antonius and Gaius Julius Caesar were Consuls, a cabal of Roman Senators conspired to murder the Dictator of the Roman Republic. In the year of our Lord 1586 one Anthony Babington lead a band of Roman Catholics in a conspiracy to kill the reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth and place Mary, Queen of Scots, upon the throne. In AD1936 the Communist Government of Russia instigated the Moscow Trials to ensure the conviction of Leon Trotsky of crimes against the Russian State, whilst in 2003 the Coalition of the Willing arguably conspired to cover up the rationale behind the invasion of Iraq.

These events are examples of historically verified Conspiracies. They are but the tip of an iceberg; history is littered with Conspiracies. These are not Conspiracy Theories. Conspiracy Theories are explanations of events by way of Conspiracies whilst a Conspiracy is an events. Whilst it is true that there are Conspiracy Theories associated with Conspiracies not every Conspiracy Theory

is true; many of them are the musings of paranoid Conspiracy Theorists who want to convince you that the Queen Mother was a crack-dealing reptiloid and that George W. Bush, Jr. is a descendant of the Merovingian Kings of France. Yet, no matter what we might believe about any of these contemporary Conspiracy Theories, it is just a brute fact of history that Conspiracies have occurred. The question, then, that I want to ask in the course of this paper is:

Do the instances of Conspiracies in history give us warrant for the claim that there are contemporary Conspiracies?

2 The Question - Preamble

Let us start by defining some key terms. What, exactly, is a Conspiracy? The usual answer is that a Conspiracy is the action of a cabal who, in secret, seek to achieve some end. This I take to be an uncontroversial definition. Firstly, a Conspiracy requires co-conspirators; a Conspiracy of one person is not a Conspiracy at all. Secondly, the desired ends of the co-conspirators must be kept secret because the ends are either injurious to the public good (for example, the vilification of a political enemy) or are to be a surprise (for example, the sudden removal of a dictator). In addition, the plans and schemes of the co-conspirators must be kept secret because elements outside the cabal might move to block their actions or the Conspiracy can only be considered successful if others are kept unaware of it. It is also uncontroversial, or at least so I think, to suggest that Conspiracies like these go on all the time. That surprise birthday party my family organised back when I was five? Conspiracy. The fact that when I

returned from London in May 2006 my family hid the fact from most of my friends; that was also a Conspiracy.

It could be argued that these two examples are not the kind of things we mean when we say Conspiracy. One reason why we might claim that events such as the surprise birthday party or my return from London are not Conspiracies is that the events we think best identify Conspiracies are covert assassinations, regime changes and the like. The thought is that surprise birthday parties are common whilst Conspiracies are relatively rare. Another reason might be that these little Conspiracies are just not the kind of thing we are bothered by. In this paper my focus will be on those big, world-changing Conspiracies (even though my surprise birthday party is a really good story in its own right).

Finally, when people talk about Conspiracies they seem to be talking about political Conspiracies. We should note, though, that commercial Conspiracies, where a business seeks to hide its illegal behaviour, happen as well. Commercial Conspiracies look a lot like political Conspiracies but whilst commercial Conspiracies merely affect consumers, political Conspiracies affect taxpayers. Our focus will be on political Conspiracies because this has been the interest of philosophers in this rather young field of philosophical inquiry.

2.1 Charles Pigden's Answer to 'The Question'

Charles Pigden, in his 1996 article 'Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories?' and later in his 2006 article 'Complots of Mischief' argues that the superstition that claims that believing in the existence of Conspiracies is

crazy, suspect, disreputable or unbelievable is, itself, a superstition (Pigden 2006, p. 160). Pigden's argument is that if we consider the incidences of Conspiracies in the past (and Pigden gives a litany of examples ranging from the Roman Republic to the present day) then you are obliged to believe that Conspiracies have occurred (Pigden 2006, p. 157, 160). As some of these Conspiracies occurred recently then it is reasonable to believe in the existence of contemporary Conspiracies.

“To suggest, for example, that New Zealand's lurch to the right is due to a conspiracy between leading politicians, the Treasury, and big business is to invite the shaking of heads and pitying looks from sophisticated colleagues. Everybody knows that that is not the way history works. Yet, on the face of it, the evidence points the other way. History is littered with conspiracies, successful and otherwise. The reign of Elizabeth I, for instance, reads like a catalog of conspiracies—the Ridolfi plot, the Throckmorton plot, the Babington plot, and so on—and the queen herself was no stranger to conspiratorial intrigue. So why is it so silly to believe in conspiracies?” (Pigden 1995, p. 3)

Pigden's argument is not that we should believe in all posited Conspiracies but rather that it is sometimes appropriate to cite Conspiracies in the explanation of an event. This seems perfectly reasonable; the incidence of Conspiracies in history should suffice to show that a total skepticism in regards to the possibility of cabals conspiring now is unwarranted. However, Pigden is also committed, at least explicitly in his 1996 article, to the stronger claim that

it is often appropriate to cite Conspiracies in explanations of history. The large incidence of Conspiracies in history, he argues, give us grounds to believe that there is a similar incidence level of contemporary Conspiracies.

Pigden's argument looks simple; Conspiracies have occurred and we should expect from this that Conspiracies probably are occurring now. There are several questions, however. The instances of Conspiracies in history informs our warrant about current and future instances, but how? Do we count all the Conspiracies in the past, divide by year or ruler or regime and then produce a number? Will the number be a constant? Will it show a growing trend of Conspiracies or a diminishing one? The problem with Pigdens argument is that it is not clear how past instances of such events give us any indication of whether they should continue to occur. There have been a lot of historical instances of mass deaths due to influenza but whilst we might continue to think that this is a possibility now we might also think that it is a diminishing possibility. Unless we can show that the circumstances under which Conspiracies in history and contemporary Conspiracies occur are the same, then it is simply not clear how the incidence of the former affects the likelihood of the latter.

Pigden does not provide an answer to the question of whether the incidence of Conspiracies in history give us warrant for the claim that there is a similar incidence of contemporary Conspiracies, mostly because his concern is to show that the incidence of Conspiracies in history give us grounds to not be immediately dismissive of the claim that we should not be total sceptics about the likelihood of contemporary Conspiracies. In this respect I think Pigden

makes a very interesting point; people in the past have conspired and, unless you can show that there is some reason as to why similar people now would not or could not conspire, then it does seem irrational to simply dismiss belief in postulated Conspiracies out of hand. The instances of Conspiracies in history should, at least, make us curious to investigate such claims today and not engage in a total scepticism about them.

I am sympathetic to Pigden's intuition; previous instances of a kind of event do make us think that we should expect further instances. If politicians have conspired in the past should we not expect them to conspire in the future, human nature being what it is?

2.2 Lee Bashams Answer to 'The Question'

Lee Basham, in his two articles, 'Living with the Conspiracy,' (Basham 2001) and 'Malevolent Global Conspiracy' (Basham 2003) provides a 'Yes, but No!' answer to the question 'Do the instances of Conspiracies in history give us warrant to the claim that there are contemporary Conspiracies?'

Basham's articles are replies to Brian L. Keeley whose 1999 article 'Of Conspiracy Theories' (Keeley 1999) claimed that Conspiracy Theories entail 'Public Trust Skepticism.' Keeley argues that we should find belief in Conspiracy Theories suspect as such beliefs entail a pervading scepticism of social data.

"It is this pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions entailed by some mature conspiracy theories which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted. It is

not their lack of falsifiability per se, but the increasing amount of skepticism required to maintain faith in a conspiracy theory as time passes and the conspiracy is not uncovered in a convincing fashion. As this skepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes.” (Keeley 1999, p. 123)

Keeley's argument goes something like this; Conspiracy Theories make use of errant data, data contrary to or unaccounted for by the official, non-conspiratorial explanation of the event under examination. This makes Conspiracy Theories look more complete than their rivals. In addition, Conspiracy Theories predict disinformation, data that is contradictory to the Conspiracy Theory. Keeley argues that this means that Conspiracy Theories cannot be falsified and that the claims of Conspiracy Theorists are not *prima facie* irrational. Any cabal seeking to hide their plot will produce disinformation to support the official view and thus lead people away from their nefarious activities. This move, however, also robs the believer in a given Conspiracy Theory the ability to falsify their own theory. This, Keeley argues, leads to 'Public Trust Skepticism;' because Conspiracy Theories rely on social data the Conspiracy Theorist must doubt the veracity of any such information and be a skeptic in regard to all public information.

Basham is, in fact, in broad agreement with Keeley but he also argues that as Conspiracies are a fact of history that it seems it has been rational in the past to believe in some associated Conspiracy Theories. Basham argues that the Public Trust Skepticism approach, then, is not the reason to treat claims about

the existence of Conspiracies today as epistemically dubious.

“Are such conspiracies really possible? There’s no denying that we live in a remarkably secretive, hierarchically organized civilization. The major bases of power—national governments and global corporate empires—combine enormous institutional, financial, and technological resources with extensive mechanisms of secrecy, both preventative and punitive. Financial gain, political power, and maniacal ego amplification have always proved strong temptations for unaccountable authorities. Such a civilization is ripe for allegations of organized, society-wide manipulations and deceptions affecting most everyone’s life. It’s no surprise that such allegations are exceedingly common. On the face of things there is a serious prior probability of global conspiracy. With the emergence of a truly global political-economic system, this possibility has never been more sobering.” (Basham 2003, p. 92)

Basham correctly maintains that we have reason to believe that public institutions have conspired, or have been involved in conspiring, against the public. We have examples in history of public institutions, such as branches of the government, being involved in Conspiracies. We should, then, at least admit the possibility that such public institutions could be involved in Conspiracies again. Basham’s argument is that whilst belief in contemporary Conspiracies does engender at least some scepticism about social data this is a trade-off we should be willing to make because some claims about Conspiracies today are true.

Basham is arguing along the same lines as Pigden; instances of

Conspiracies in history seem to give us warrant for the claim that there are contemporary Conspiracies. In regard to further instances of contemporary Conspiracies, however, Basham argues that we should expect there to be an ever lowering incidence because the public institutions in our society are becoming increasingly open.

I call this the ‘Openness Objection.’ Basham is arguing that the openness of our political process is an objection to Keeley’s Public Trust Skepticism. The public institutions and the processes of our Western Democracy are open and an open society is one where people will find out about the conspiratorial behaviour of others. Whether this is due to the actions of the Free Press, interested individuals or accidental discoveries is not important; what does matter is that it is possible for any one of us to be able to (or know someone who can) check and investigate the operational processes and procedures of our society. Whilst we have some, possibly even very good, reasons to be currently suspicious of our public institutions, because of their previous complicity in Conspiracies, we should acknowledge that such institutions are becoming more open and thus our suspicion should diminish with time (Basham 2003, p. 95). This is why Basham thinks that we can hold on to our belief that some Conspiracies have occurred but not succumb to a total scepticism of public data; the more open our society becomes the more secure our sources of social data become¹.

So, is our society open? Basham does not argue that we live in a completely open, unspired world but rather that we do not live in a world that is completely closed (and therefore totally spired). Basham’s reasons for

our society being, at least, somewhat open is threefold. Firstly, not all the evidence for and against the claim of any given Conspiracy is socially-transmitted. Basic claims, such as my being an eye-witness to an event can influence my belief in respect to a given Conspiracy (Basham 2003, p. 98). Secondly, and more contentiously, there is no need for cabals to totally subvert the fabric of social reality. Basham argues that a totally conspired world will be one where the public institutions of government are, in effect, pseudo-institutions; massive, elaborate decoys hiding the true holders of political power. Instead, cabals are more likely to work within visible power structures because they will exert the same level of control in a simpler fashion and because the effort to create and maintain the existence of pseudo-institutions would present potentially insurmountable difficulties for even the most powerful cabals. Thirdly, the presence of real, open public institutions will attract those who are ambitious for power, thus providing cabals with a breeding ground for their Conspiracies (Basham 2003, p. 99).

Whilst I agree that individuals can possess evidence, via basic claims, for a given Conspiracy without relying on some associated social claims I am not entirely convinced by Basham's two-part justification that we exist somewhere towards the unconspired end of the societal spectrum. It may be true that we have no reason to think that our public institutions are, in fact, pseudo-institutions (or fronts, as they say in the trade) run by shadowy cabals but the fact that most public institutions are hierarchical means that public institutions can look more open than they are. Whilst the individual field agents

of the CIA might well be honest, sincere law enforcement agents acting for the good of America internationally, constantly being audited, the Board of Directors who supervise them may well have their agenda and answer to no one. Basham's second reason for believing that we are somewhat unconspired seems to rest on the claim that it would suit our shadowy cabals to operate in an open society (rather than expend energy on creating and maintaining pseudo-institutions) which simply seems like cold comfort. My only argument in defence of the Openness Objection is that it just seems true of our contemporary Western Democracy that it is more open now than it was a hundred years ago and that this is true because of an increase in the eligibility to vote, the dismantling of many traditional power structures as well as an increased ability to audit what others are doing.

Whatever you think about the merit of the Openness Objection Basham, I think, undermines his reply to Keeley. Basham, in his 2003 article, argues that a feature of both private and public institutions is their hierarchical nature and that this makes it easy to control the flow of information that the general public gets from its sources (Basham 2003, p. 93).

If Basham is committed to the belief that hierarchies can control the flow of information from public or private institutions to the general public then these self same hierarchies could very well make public institutions look more open than they really are. If my cabal has committed electoral fraud by increasing the ACT Party vote in Epsom by inserting votes from people such as Albert Camus and John Stuart Mill then I can, when someone comes to check the registry, alter

it. If the minutes of a meeting are kept by a secretary then the council need only pay off the secretary, et cetera. The process of obtaining public information is governed by a bureaucracy and this bureaucracies, by and large, are hierarchical. Whilst we might agree with Basham that our public institutions are authentic and relatively open we might also believe that if such public institutions are hierarchical then their relative openness, to wit their trustworthiness, is subject to beliefs about their previous complicity in conspiratorial behaviour. I think Basham would agree on this point; he does seem to think that our society is not sufficiently open enough at this stage to warrant the belief that we live in a world of mostly unconspiring institutions but merely that we can say that our society is open enough to be able to claim that we do not live in a society where all of our institutions are conspiring (Basham 2003, p. 99).

Basham ameliorates Keeleys Public Trust Skepticism by arguing that as these institutions become increasingly open our suspicion in regards to the data they produce should diminish. Bashams answer to the question ‘Do the instances of Conspiracies in history give us warrant for the claim that there are contemporary Conspiracies?’ then, is ‘Yes, somewhat, for now, but tomorrow?’ Well, if you think our society is fairly open then tomorrow’s Conspiracy are increasingly unlikely. If you think our society is still fairly closed, then tomorrow’s Conspiracy is probably in the planning stages now.

3 Conspiracies Then, Conspiracies Now and Conspiracies Future

Pigden's argument that instances of Conspiracies in history should inform our belief in the occurrence of contemporary Conspiracies is interesting but, I think, unconvincing. I find it unconvincing because, like Basham, I do think our society is more open than it was in the past. Whilst I think that the incidences of Conspiracies in history are noteworthy I think that, at best, they tell us that people will continue to intend to conspire but that they might well find that this intention cannot be fulfilled. This is because the increasing openness of contemporary society makes it harder and harder for would-be cabals to hide their plots.

Pigden's argument relies a *ceteris paribus* claim that, all things being equal, Conspiracies in history give us warrant for the existence of contemporary Conspiracies, but all things are not equal; with a change in society we have a change in the way that Conspiracies work. Past instances might tell us that people want to conspire but that does not mean they are conspiring or going to conspire. The mechanism of a successful Conspiracy might be such that a change in society renders a potential conspirator unable to carry out their plan.

Many of the examples of Conspiracies in the historical record can be characterised by the cabals ability to conceal or obscure their actions. They are often the kind of examples where the flow of information about political individuals was restricted by breeding and education and thus a commoner like you or I was never in a position to scrutinise the political processes of society. Now, however, it appears that we have more epistemic access to political

processes and procedures. Where once an agent not involved in a cabal had little chance to investigate possible intrigue it seems that we are now hard-pressed to ignore the invasive nature of our media.

I think that this suggests that there is a difference between Conspiracies in history and contemporary Conspiracies. Conspiracies in history, by and large, operated in a society where there was little to no ability for people outside the cabal to investigate the plots and schemes of the conspirators and those people who could investigate such things were not members of the lay public but rather people in positions of power.

For example, the assassination of Julius Caesar was undiscovered (although some Ancient authors claim he was forewarned) because the cabal of Senators were not only able to keep the secret amongst themselves but also because these men were of senatorial rank and, due to their service to the Republic, deserved respect and privacy.

In regards to the Babington Plot it was discovered when letters from Anthony Babington to Mary Stuart were intercepted by the Queens Men, resulting in the torture and confession of Babington. Sir Francis Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth I's Spymaster, was already aware of various plots, such as that of Roberto Ridolfi, to overthrow Elizabeth and place Mary, a Catholic on the throne and had thus been keeping an eye on the activities of known Catholic sympathisers.

We could say that in the past cabals had it easy; in a closed society the act of conspiring was relatively simple. This kind of Conspiracy, where the cabal

seeks to conceal or obscure their existence I will call ‘Obscuring Conspiracies.’ Contrast them with contemporary Conspiracies. Conspiracies today look to be somewhat subject to the Openness Objection in that it is true that it is now harder to hide a plot or scheme. Whereas in the past cabals needed to worry simply about keeping the plot secret the contemporary cabal needs to disseminate disinformation; they need to make sure the right documents are faked, the right people paid off and the right disinformation leaked, et al. These contemporary Conspiracies operate in an age of mass communication where it is relatively easy to check the processes or facts associated with the event in question.

For example, the evidence and testimony cited in Moscow Trials of the mid-1930s was examined by the Dewey Commission, who argued that the trials were, in fact, for show and that the verdicts had been assigned well before the trials began. At the time this alternative verdict was poo-pooed by the Russian Government, as well as that of the UK and the USA, but when the contents of the speech given by Khrushchev report was leaked in mid-1956 the Commission, in its claims of conspiracy, were vindicated.

In regards to the purported reason for the invasion of Iraq, that Saddam Husseins regime had ties with Al-Qaeda and that they were developing Weapons of Mass Destruction the official explanation was quickly revealed to be fraudulent due to the Press being able to analyse the reports, interview experts on the subject matter and follow up leads.

Contemporary Conspiracies do seem to be easily discovered, although the Moscow Trials, although exposed, were still thought to be legitimate for up to

twenty-years after the Dewey Commission released its findings². This kind of Conspiracy, where the cabal knows that their plan is likely to be found out and so will disseminate disinformation to distract the public from the cabals real intentions, I will call a Disinformation-disseminating Conspiracy.

It is my belief that most of the examples of Conspiracies in history are examples of Obscuring Conspiracies and that these Conspiracies give us little warrant in the belief of the occurrence of contemporary Conspiracies which, arguably, are mostly examples of Disinformation-disseminating Conspiracies.

Whilst the historical incidence of Conspiracies might well tell us that as people have desired to conspire in the past this does not mean that people are actually conspiring now. It might well be that the kinds of historical conspiring we know of are simply inconceivable today due to the increased openness of our society.

This should be a testable claim; contemporary Conspiracies should look different from Conspiracies in history. My examples thus far, I believe, bear this out.

4 A New, Related Question

I began by asking ‘Do instances of Conspiracies in history give us warrant for the claim that there are contemporary Conspiracies?’ but, as I believe I have just shown, the incidence of Conspiracies in history (which are mostly examples of Obscuring Conspiracies) tells us very little, if anything, about the incidence of contemporary Conspiracies (which are mostly examples of

Disinformation-disseminating Conspiracies). Assuming that the kind of Conspiracies we are interested in are contemporary Conspiracies (because we want to say something about their future likelihood) then the question remains whether the instances of previous contemporary Conspiracies informs our warrant in the belief that there will be further instances of contemporary Conspiracies, to wit Disinformation-disseminating Conspiracies.

Well, yes but no! Yes, the instances of contemporary Conspiracies show that Conspiracies do occur and it does seem reasonable to assume that similar Conspiracies will occur again (assuming no change in the political environment). Indeed, people are already surmising that the seemingly imminent invasion of Iran will be based upon some degree of fraudulent information. However, we also seem increasingly able to discover the existence of these Conspiracies, which suggests that Basham's Openness Objection is partially true of our society. The question of 'How open is our society?' is itself still open but I do think that we can claim that we are now more open than we were in the past.

It could be argued that at this point I have fallen into a certain trap, one where I am conflating Disinformation-disseminating Conspiracies with contemporary Conspiracies. By using the Invasion of Iraq and the Moscow Trials as examples of contemporary Conspiracies that were also examples of Disinformation-disseminating Conspiracies I may have assumed that the type 'Contemporary Conspiracies' are just the same kind of thing as 'Disinformation-disseminating Conspiracies.' It would be an understandable mistake for me to make; the kind of Conspiracies that get reported upon and

investigated look like Disinformation-disseminating Conspiracies where nothing you are told can be trusted. Not all of them turn out to be true but when one does it shocks the public. It would be easy to mistake all such contemporary Conspiracies for this kind. However, in my defence, I do think that Obscuring Conspiracies also occur and, more importantly, the Openness Objection should also apply to them. That surprise birthday party my parents conspired to hold for me when I was five? Had I paid more attention to my parents and less time in that sandpit I could have rumbled them. My surprise return from London? It would have taken work by some of my friends to find out about that, but it could have been done. Whilst my answer to the question ‘Do instances of Conspiracies give us warrant for the claim that there are going to be further instances of Conspiracies?’ is going to be a ‘Yes, but No!’ response aimed primarily at contemporary Conspiracies of the disinformation-disseminating kind, I think I can give the same answer to the contemporary Obscuring Conspiracies as well.

If we believe that our society is fairly open then we should expect that successful Disinformation-disseminating Conspiracies will be on the decline. This is probably true of Obscuring Conspiracies as well. I would suspect that the level of successful Obscuring Conspiracies will fall at a slower rate. Still, even small, seemingly innocuous groups will be investigated, just like those large Public Institutions. Big Brother may not be looking over our shoulders (yet) but the Neighbourhood Watch are.

Notes

¹This does suggest, I think, that future instances of Conspiracy Theories are more and more likely to be true because the social data they are formed from will be so highly scrutinised that the inference to Conspiracy should be good.

²That this same procedure did not work in favour of the WMD rationale for invading Iraq might go some way to support Bashams Openness Objection.

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