**Conspiracy Theory**

**From The Black Vault Encyclopedia Project**

*For the 1997 film, see* [*Conspiracy Theory (film)*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Conspiracy_Theory_(film))*.*



This proposed logo for the [US](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=United_States&action=edit&redlink=1) [Information Awareness Office](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Information_Awareness_Office&action=edit&redlink=1) was dropped due to fears that its pseudo-[Masonic](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Freemasonry) symbolism would provoke conspiracy theories.

A **conspiracy theory** attempts to explain the cause of an event as a secret, and often deceptive, [plot](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Conspiracy&action=edit&redlink=1) by a [covert](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Covert&action=edit&redlink=1) alliance rather than as an overt activity or as natural occurrence.

The term "conspiracy theory" is used by scholars and in popular culture to identify a type of [folklore](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Folklore&action=edit&redlink=1) similar to an [urban legend](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Urban_legend&action=edit&redlink=1), having certain regular features, especially an explanatory narrative which is constructed with certain naive methodological flaws. The term is also used [pejoratively](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Pejorative&action=edit&redlink=1) to dismiss allegedly misconceived, paranoid or outlandish rumors.

Most people who have their theory or speculation labeled a "conspiracy theory" reject the term as prejudicial.

**Overview**

The term "conspiracy theory" may be a neutral descriptor for a [conspiracy](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Conspiracy&action=edit&redlink=1) claim. However, conspiracy *theory* is also used to indicate a [narrative](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Narrative&action=edit&redlink=1) [genre](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Genre&action=edit&redlink=1) that includes a broad selection of (not necessarily related) arguments for the existence of grand conspiracies, any of which might have far-reaching social and political implications if true.

Many conspiracy theories are false, or lack enough verifiable evidence to be taken seriously, raising the intriguing question of what mechanisms might exist in popular culture that lead to their invention and subsequent uptake. In pursuit of answers to that question, conspiracy theory has been a topic of interest for sociologists, psychologists and experts in folklore since at least the 1960s, when the [assassination](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/John_F._Kennedy_assassination) of US President [John F. Kennedy](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/John_F._Kennedy) provoked an unprecedented [level of speculation](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Kennedy_assassination_theories). This academic interest has identified a set of familiar structural features by which membership of the genre may be established, and has presented a range of hypotheses on the basis of studying the genre.

Whether or not a particular conspiracy allegation may be impartially or neutrally labelled a conspiracy theory is subject to [some controversy](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Conspiracy_theory#Controversies). If legitimate uses of the label are admitted, they work by identifying structural features in the story in question which correspond to those features listed below.

See also [conspiracy as a legal concept](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Conspiracy&action=edit&redlink=1).

**Features**

Allegations exhibiting several of the following features are candidates for classification as conspiracy theories. Confidence in such classification improves the more such features are exhibited:

1. Initiated on the basis of limited, partial or circumstantial evidence;  
   *Conceived in reaction to* [*media*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Mass_media&action=edit&redlink=1) *reports and images, as opposed to, for example, thorough knowledge of the relevant* [*forensic*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Forensics&action=edit&redlink=1) *evidence*.
2. Addresses an event or process that has broad historical or emotional impact;  
   *Seeks to interpret a phenomenon which has near-universal interest and emotional significance, a story that may thus be of some compelling interest to a wide audience*.
3. Reduces morally complex social phenomena to simple, immoral actions;  
   *Impersonal, institutional processes, especially errors and oversights, interpreted as malign, consciously intended and designed by immoral individuals*.
4. Personifies complex social phenomena as powerful individual conspirators;  
   *Related to (3) but distinct from it, deduces the existence of powerful individual conspirators from the 'impossibility' that a chain of events lacked direction by a person*.
5. Allots superhuman talents or resources to conspirators;  
   *May require conspirators to possess unique discipline, unrepentant resolve, advanced or unknown technology, uncommon psychological insight, historical foresight, unlimited resources, etc*.
6. Key steps in argument rely on [inductive](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Induction_(philosophy)&action=edit&redlink=1), not [deductive](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Deductive_reasoning&action=edit&redlink=1) reasoning;  
   *Inductive steps are mistaken to bear as much confidence as deductive ones*.
7. Appeals to 'common sense';  
   *Common sense steps substitute for the more robust, academically respectable methodologies available for investigating sociological and scientific phenomena*.
8. Exhibits well-established logical and methodological [fallacies](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Logical_fallacy&action=edit&redlink=1);  
   *Formal and informal logical fallacies are readily identifiable among the key steps of the argument*.
9. Is produced and circulated by 'outsiders', often anonymous, and generally lacking peer review;  
   *Story originates with a person who lacks any insider contact or knowledge, and enjoys popularity among persons who lack critical (especially technical) knowledge*.
10. Is upheld by persons with demonstrably false conceptions of relevant science;  
    *At least some of the story's believers believe it on the basis of a mistaken grasp of elementary scientific facts*.
11. Enjoys zero credibility in expert communities;  
    *Academics and professionals tend to ignore the story, treating it as too frivolous to invest their time and risk their personal authority in disproving*.
12. Rebuttals provided by experts are ignored or accommodated through elaborate new twists in the narrative;  
    *When experts* do *respond to the story with critical new evidence, the conspiracy is elaborated (sometimes to a spectacular degree) to discount the new evidence, often incorporating the rebuttal as a part of the conspiracy.'*

**Origins of conspiracy theories**

Humans naturally respond to events or situations which have had an emotional impact upon them by trying to make sense of those events, typically in spiritual, moral, political, or scientific terms.

Events which seem to resist such interpretation—for example, because they are, in fact, unexplainable—may provoke the inquirer to look harder for a meaning, until one is reached that is capable of offering the inquirer the required emotional satisfaction. As sociological historian Holger Herwig found in studying German explanations of [World War I](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=World_War_I&action=edit&redlink=1):

*Those events that are most important are hardest to understand, because they attract the greatest attention from mythmakers and charlatans.*

This normal process could be diverted by a number of influences. At the level of the individual, pressing psychological needs may influence the process, and certain of our universal mental tools may impose [epistemic](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Epistemology&action=edit&redlink=1) 'blind spots'. At the group or sociological level, historic factors may make the process of assigning satisfactory meanings more or less problematic.

**Psychological origins**

When conspiracy theories combine logical fallacies with lack of evidence, the result is a worldview known as [conspiracism](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Conspiracism&action=edit&redlink=1). Conspiracism is a worldview that sees major historic events and trends as the result of secret conspiracies. According to many [psychologists](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Psychologist&action=edit&redlink=1), a person who believes in one conspiracy theory is often a believer in other conspiracy theories.

Psychologists believe that the search for meaningfulness features largely in conspiracism and the development of conspiracy theories. That desire alone may be powerful enough to lead to the initial formulation of the idea. Once cognized, [confirmation bias](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Confirmation_bias&action=edit&redlink=1) and avoidance of [cognitive dissonance](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Cognitive_dissonance&action=edit&redlink=1) may reinforce the belief. In a context where a conspiracy theory has become popular within a social group, [communal reinforcement](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Communal_reinforcement&action=edit&redlink=1) may equally play a part.

[Evolutionary psychology](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Evolutionary_psychology&action=edit&redlink=1) may also play a significant role. Paranoid tendencies are associated with an animal's ability to recognize danger. Higher animals attempt to construct mental models of the thought processes of both rivals and predators in order to read their hidden intentions and to predict their future behavior. Such an ability is extremely valuable in sensing and avoiding danger in an animal community. If this danger-sensing ability should begin making false predictions, or be triggered by benign evidence, or otherwise become pathological, the result is paranoid delusions. A conspiracy theorist sees danger everywhere, and may simply be the victim of a malfunction in a valuable and evolutionarily-old natural ability.

**Epistemic bias?**

It is possible that certain basic human [epistemic](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Epistemology&action=edit&redlink=1) biases are projected onto the material under scrutiny. According to one study humans apply a 'rule of thumb' by which we expect a significant event to have a significant cause. The study offered subjects four versions of events, in which a foreign president was (a) successfully assassinated, (b) wounded but survived, (c) survived with wounds but died of a heart attack at a later date, and (d) was unharmed. Subjects were significantly more likely to suspect conspiracy in the case of the 'major events'—in which the president died—than in the other cases, despite all other evidence available to them being equal.

Another epistemic 'rule of thumb' that can be misapplied to a mystery involving other humans is [cui bono](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Cui_bono&action=edit&redlink=1)? (who stands to gain?). This sensitivity to the hidden motives of other people might be either an evolved or an encultured feature of human consciousness, but either way it appears to be universal. If the inquirer lacks access to the relevant facts of the case, or if there are structural interests rather than personal motives involved, this method of inquiry will tend to produce a falsely conspiratorial account of an impersonal event. The direct corollary of this epistemic bias in pre-scientific cultures is the tendency to imagine the world in terms of [animism](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Animism&action=edit&redlink=1). Inanimate objects or substances of significance to humans are [fetishized](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Fetishism&action=edit&redlink=1) and supposed to harbor benign or malignant spirits.

**Clinical psychology**

For relatively rare individuals, an obsessive compulsion to believe, prove or re-tell a conspiracy theory may indicate one or more of several well-understood psychological conditions, and other hypothetical ones: [paranoia](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Paranoia&action=edit&redlink=1), [denial](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Denial&action=edit&redlink=1), [schizophrenia](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Schizophrenia&action=edit&redlink=1), [Mean world syndrome](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Mean_world_syndrome&action=edit&redlink=1).

**Sociopolitical origins**

[Christopher Hitchens](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Christopher_Hitchens&action=edit&redlink=1) represents conspiracy theories as the 'exhaust fumes of democracy', the unavoidable result of a large amount of information circulating among a large number of people. Other social commentators and sociologists argue that conspiracy theories are produced according to variables which may change within a democratic (or other type of) society.

Conspiratorial accounts can be emotionally satisfying when they place events in a readily-understandable, moral context. The subscriber to the theory is able to assign moral responsibility for an emotionally troubling event or situation to a clearly-conceived group of individuals. Crucially, that group *does not include* the believer. The believer may then feel excused any moral or political responsibility for remedying whatever institutional or societal flaw might be the actual source of the dissonance. Alternatively, believers may find themselves committed to a type of activism, to expose the alleged conspirators; see, for example, the [9/11 Truth Movement](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=9/11_Truth_Movement&action=edit&redlink=1).

Where responsible behavior is prevented by social conditions, or is simply beyond the ability of an individual, the conspiracy theory facilitates the emotional discharge or [closure](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Closure_(psychology)&action=edit&redlink=1) which such emotional *challenges* (after [Erving Goffman](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Erving_Goffman&action=edit&redlink=1)) require. Like [moral panics](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Moral_panic&action=edit&redlink=1), conspiracy theories thus occur more frequently within communities which are experiencing [social isolation](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Alienation&action=edit&redlink=1) or political disempowerment.

Mark Fenster argues that "just because overarching conspiracy theories are wrong does not mean they are not on to something. Specifically, they ideologically address real structural inequities, and constitute a response to a withering civil society and the concentration of the ownership of the means of production, which together leave the political subject without the ability to be recognized or to signify in the public realm" (1999: 67).

For example, the modern form of [anti-Semitism](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Anti-Semitism&action=edit&redlink=1) is identified in Britannica 1911 as a conspiracy theory serving the self-understanding of the European [aristocracy](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Aristocracy&action=edit&redlink=1), whose social power waned with the rise of [bourgeois](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Bourgeoisie&action=edit&redlink=1) society.

A particularly political individual or group may respond skeptically or cynically towards an event or process which does not fit with his/its existing worldview. For example, a [neo-Nazi](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Neo-Nazism&action=edit&redlink=1) or an anti-Israeli organization such as [Hezbollah](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Hezbollah&action=edit&redlink=1) might promote claims of Jewish involvement in [9/11](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/September_11,_2001_attacks) in order to incorporate that event into its own political narrative in a manner compatible to meeting its own ends.

**Disillusionment**

In the late 20th century, Western societies increasingly experienced a process of disengagement, disaffection or disillusionment with traditional political institutions among their general populations. Falling election participation and declines in other key metrics of social engagement were noted by several observers. For a prominent example, see [Robert D. Putnam's](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Robert_Putnam&action=edit&redlink=1) [Bowling Alone](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Bowling_Alone&action=edit&redlink=1) thesis. Those who were most influenced by this period, the so-called "[Generation X](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Generation_X&action=edit&redlink=1)," are characterized by their [cynicism](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Cynicism&action=edit&redlink=1) towards traditional institutions and authorities, offering a case example of the context of political disempowerment detailed above.

In that context, a typical individual will tend to be more isolated from the kinds of peer networks which grant access to broad sources of information, and may instinctively distrust any statement or claim made by certain people, media and other authority-bearing institutions. For some individuals, the consequence may be a tendency to attribute anything bad that happens to the distrusted authority. For example, some people attribute the [September 11, 2001](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/September_11,_2001_attacks) attacks to a conspiracy involving the U.S. government (or disfavored politicians) instead of to [Islamic terrorists](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Islamist_terrorism&action=edit&redlink=1) associated with [Al-Qaeda](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Al-Qaeda&action=edit&redlink=1) (see [9/11 conspiracy theories](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/9/11_conspiracy_theories).)

**Media tropes**

Media commentators regularly note a tendency in news media and wider culture to understand events through the prism of individual agents, as opposed to more complex structural or institutional accounts. If this is a true observation, it may be expected that the audience which both demands and consumes this emphasis itself is more receptive to personalized, [dramatic](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Drama&action=edit&redlink=1) accounts of social phenomena.

A second, perhaps related, media trope is the effort to allocate individual responsibility for negative events. The media have a tendency to start to seek culprits if an event occurs that is of such significance that it does not drop off the news agenda within a few days. Of this trend, it has been said that the concept of a pure accident is no longer permitted in a news item [[1]](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4217024.stm). Again, if this is a true observation, it may be expected to reflect a real change in how the media consumer perceives negative events.

**Controversies**

Aside from [controversies](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Controversies&action=edit&redlink=1) over the merits of particular conspiracy claims (see [catalog](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Conspiracy_theory#Conspiracy_theories_by_topic_or_main_figure#Conspiracy_theories_by_topic_or_main_figure) below), and the various differing academic opinions (above), the general category of conspiracy theory is *itself* a matter of some public contestation.

**Usage**

The term "conspiracy theory" is considered by different observers to be a neutral description for a conspiracy claim, a pejorative term used to dismiss such a claim, and a term that can be positively embraced by proponents of such a claim. The term may be used by some for arguments they might not wholly believe but consider radical and exciting. The most widely accepted sense of the term is that which popular culture and academic usage share, certainly having negative implications for a narrative's probable truth value.

Given this popular understanding of the term, it is conceivable that the term might be used illegitimately and inappropriately, as a means to dismiss what are in fact substantial and well-evidenced accusations. The legitimacy of each such usage will therefore be a matter of some controversy. Disinterested observers will compare an allegation's features with those of the category listed above, in order to determine whether a given usage is legitimate or prejudicial.

Certain proponents of conspiracy claims and their supporters argue that the term is entirely illegitimate, and should be considered just as politically manipulative as the Soviet practice of treating political dissidents as clinically insane. The term *conspiracy theory* is itself the object of a type of conspiracy theory, which argues that those using the term are manipulating their audience to disregard the topic under discussion, either in a deliberate attempt to conceal the truth, or as dupes of more deliberate conspirators.

When conspiracy theories are offered as official claims (e.g. originating from a governmental authority, such as an intelligence agency) they are not usually considered as conspiracy theories. For example, certain activities of the [House Un-American Activities Committee](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=House_Un-American_Activities_Committee&action=edit&redlink=1) may be considered to have been an official attempt to promote a conspiracy theory, yet its claims are seldom referred to as such.

**The truth of a conspiracy theory**

Perhaps the most contentious aspect of a conspiracy theory is the problem of settling a particular theory's truth to the satisfaction of both its proponents and its opponents. Particular accusations of conspiracy vary widely in their plausibility, but some common standards for assessing their likely truth value may be applied in each case:

* [Occam's razor](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Occam%27s_razor&action=edit&redlink=1) - is the alternative story more, or less, probable than the mainstream story? Rules of thumb here include the [multiplication of entities](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Multiplication_of_entities&action=edit&redlink=1) test.
* [Psychology](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Psychology&action=edit&redlink=1) - does the conspiracy accusation satisfy an identifiable psychological [need](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Conspiracy_theory#Psychology_of_conspiracy_theory#Psychology_of_conspiracy_theory) for its proposer?
* [Falsifiability](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Falsifiability&action=edit&redlink=1) - are the "proofs" offered for the argument well-constructed, i.e., using sound methodology?
* [Whistleblowers](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Whistleblower&action=edit&redlink=1) - how many people–and what kind–have to be loyal conspirators?

**Real conspiracies**

On some occasions a particular accusation of conspiracy is found to be true (see for example, [Emile Zola's](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=%C3%89mile_Zola&action=edit&redlink=1) accusations concerning the [Dreyfus Affair](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Dreyfus_Affair&action=edit&redlink=1)). Where such success is due to sound investigative methodology, it is clear that it would not exhibit many of the compromising [features](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Conspiracy_theory#Features#Features) identified as characteristic of conspiracy theory, and would thus not commonly be considered a 'Conspiracy theory'. In the case of the 1971 revelation of the [FBI's](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Federal_Bureau_of_Investigation&action=edit&redlink=1) [COINTELPRO](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=COINTELPRO&action=edit&redlink=1) counter-intelligence work against domestic political activists, it is not clear to what extent a 'conspiracy theory' involving government agents was either proposed or dismissed prior to the program’s factual exposure.

Some argue that the reality of such conspiracies should caution against any casual dismissal of conspiracy theory. A number of true or possibly true conspiracies are cited in making this case; the [Mafia](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Mafia&action=edit&redlink=1), the [Business Plot](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Business_Plot&action=edit&redlink=1), [MKULTRA](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Project_MKULTRA&action=edit&redlink=1), various CIA involvements in overseas [coups d'état](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Coup_d%27%C3%A9tat&action=edit&redlink=1), [Operation Northwoods](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Operation_Northwoods&action=edit&redlink=1), the [Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Tuskegee_Syphilis_Study&action=edit&redlink=1), the [General Motors streetcar conspiracy](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=General_Motors_streetcar_conspiracy&action=edit&redlink=1) and the [Pearl Harbor advance-knowledge debate](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Pearl_Harbor_advance-knowledge_debate&action=edit&redlink=1), among others.

**Falsifiability**

[Karl Popper](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Karl_Popper&action=edit&redlink=1) argued that [science](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Science&action=edit&redlink=1) is written as a set of [falsifiable](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Falsifiability&action=edit&redlink=1) [hypotheses](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Hypothesis&action=edit&redlink=1); [metaphysical](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Metaphysics&action=edit&redlink=1) or unscientific theories and claims are those which do not admit any possibility for falsification. Critics of conspiracy theories sometimes argue that many of them are not falsifiable and so cannot be scientific. This accusation is often accurate, and is a necessary consequence of the logical structure of certain kinds of conspiracy theories. These take the form of uncircumscribed [existential statements](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Existential_quantification&action=edit&redlink=1), alleging the *existence* of some action or object without specifying the *place or time* at which it can be observed. Failure to observe the phenomenon can then always be the result of looking in the wrong place or looking at the wrong time — that is, having been duped by the conspiracy. This makes impossible any demonstration that the conspiracy does not exist.

In his two volume work, *The Open Society & Its Enemies, 1938–1943* Popper used the term "conspiracy theory" to criticize the ideologies driving [fascism](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Fascism&action=edit&redlink=1), [Nazism](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Nazism&action=edit&redlink=1) and [communism](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Communism&action=edit&redlink=1). Popper argued that totalitarianism was founded on "conspiracy theories" which drew on imaginary plots driven by paranoid scenarios predicated on tribalism, racism or classism. Popper did not argue against the existence of everyday conspiracies (as incorrectly suggested in much of the later literature). Popper even uses the term "conspiracy" to describe ordinary political activity in the [classical Athens](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=History_of_Athens&action=edit&redlink=1) of [Plato](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Plato&action=edit&redlink=1) (who was the principal target of his attack in *The Open Society & Its Enemies*).

In response to this objection to conspiracy theories, some argue that *no* political or historical theory can be scientific by Popper's criterion because none reliably generate testable predictions. In fact, Popper himself rejected the claims of [Marxism](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Marxism&action=edit&redlink=1) and [psychoanalysis](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Psychoanalysis&action=edit&redlink=1) to scientific status on precisely this basis. This does not necessarily mean that either conspiracy theory, Marxism, or psychoanalysis are baseless, irrational, and false; it *does* suggest that if they are false there is no way to prove it .

Falsifiability has been widely criticized for misrepresenting the actual process of scientific discovery by a number of scholars, notably [paradigm](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Paradigm&action=edit&redlink=1) theorists and Popper's former students [Thomas Kuhn](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Thomas_Kuhn&action=edit&redlink=1), [Paul Feyerabend](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Paul_Feyerabend&action=edit&redlink=1), and [Imre Lakatos](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Imre_Lakatos&action=edit&redlink=1). Within [epistemological](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Epistemology&action=edit&redlink=1) circles, falsifiability is not now considered a tenable criterion for determining scientific status, although it remains popular.

**Conspiracy theories in fiction**

*Main article*: [Conspiracy theories (fictional)](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Conspiracy_theories_(fictional)&action=edit&redlink=1)

Conspiracies are a popular theme in several genres of fiction, notably [thrillers](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Thriller&action=edit&redlink=1) and [science fiction](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Science_fiction), primarily due to their dramatic potential: recasting complex or meaningless historical events into relatively simple [morality plays](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Morality_play&action=edit&redlink=1), in which bad people are the cause of bad events, and good people face the relatively simple task of identifying and defeating them. Compared to the subtlety and complexity of more rigorous sociological or historical accounts of events, conspiracy theory makes for a neat and intuitive narrative. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the English word "[plot](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Plot&action=edit&redlink=1)" applies to both a story, and the activities of conspirators.

[*Conspiracy Theory*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Conspiracy_Theory_(film)) is a 1997 thriller about a taxi driver (played by Mel Gibson) who publishes a newsletter in which he discusses what he suspects are government conspiracies.

[*The X-Files*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/The_X-Files) was a popular television show during the 1990s, which followed the investigations of two intrepid FBI agents, Mulder and Scully. Many of the episodes dealt with conspiracies of many different varieties, most notably a plot for alien invasion overseen by elements of the [U.S.](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=United_States&action=edit&redlink=1) government led by the mysterious individual known only as the [Cigarette Smoking Man](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Cigarette_Smoking_Man&action=edit&redlink=1).

On the cartoon series [*King of the Hill*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=King_of_the_Hill&action=edit&redlink=1) the character [Dale Gribble](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Dale_Gribble&action=edit&redlink=1) represents the stereotypical conspiracy theory-obsessed American. Dale believes just about any and every possible conspiracy theory, from aliens to bigfoot to the JFK assassination to faked moon landings. His behavior, language, and mannerisms are all common [clichés](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Cliche&action=edit&redlink=1) of how many people regard believers in conspiracies, namely anti-social, sullen, aggressive, and egotistical.

A recent fiction genre is the [Conspiracy Novel](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Conspiracy_Novel&action=edit&redlink=1). Efforts here include both the pulpish (for example, [James Ellroy](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=James_Ellroy&action=edit&redlink=1)'s retelling of the Kennedy Assassination in [American Tabloid](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=American_Tabloid&action=edit&redlink=1)) as well as more serious novels, including [Thomas Pynchon](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Thomas_Pynchon&action=edit&redlink=1)'s entire oeuvre.

**Notes**

1. [**↑**](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Conspiracy_theory#ref_publiceye#ref_publiceye) "[Conspiracism](http://www.publiceye.org/tooclose/conspiracism.html)," Political Research Associates, (accessed June 7, 2005).
2. [**↑**](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Conspiracy_theory#ref_bps#ref_bps) "[Who shot the president?](http://www.bps.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/releases$/annual-conferences-1999-2004/who-shot-the-president$.cfm)," The British Psychological Society , March 18, 2003 (accessed June 7, 2005).
3. [**↑**](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Conspiracy_theory#ref_1911#ref_1911) "[Anti-Semitism](http://54.1911encyclopedia.org/A/AN/ANTI_SEMITISM.htm)," 1911 Online Encyclopedia, (accessed June 7, 2005).
4. [**↑**](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Conspiracy_theory#ref_Ivan#ref_Ivan) Ivan Emke, "[Agents and Structures: Journalists and the Constraints on AIDS Coverage](http://www.cjc-online.ca/viewarticle.php?id=585&layout=html)," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 25, no. 3 (2000), (accessed June 7, 2005).
5. [**↑**](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Conspiracy_theory#ref_columbia#ref_columbia) "[Top 5 New Diseases: Media Induced Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (MIPTSD)](http://www.columbia.edu/~kw96/TopFive.html#Anchor-Media-54000)," *The New Disease: A Journal of Narrative Pathology* 2 (2004), (accessed June 7, 2005).

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**See also**

* [Category: Conspiracy theorists](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Category:Conspiracy_theorists)
* [Thierry Meyssan](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Thierry_Meyssan&action=edit&redlink=1)
* [Coincidence theory](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Coincidence_theory)
* [Cover-up](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Cover-up)
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* [Conspiracism](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Conspiracism&action=edit&redlink=1) as a worldview
* [Conspiracies in fiction](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Conspiracy_theories_(fictional)&action=edit&redlink=1) (i. e., conspiracies as part of fictional works)
* [PARANOIA](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=PARANOIA&action=edit&redlink=1) (magazine)
* [Apophenia](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Apophenia&action=edit&redlink=1)
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* ["The Economics of Conspiracy Theories"](http://www.upi.com/inc/view.php?StoryID=10042002-101612-2060r), [United Press International](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=United_Press_International&action=edit&redlink=1), April 10, 2002
* [Conspiracy Theories Overview](http://www.cool.com.au/general-news/observations/conspiracy-theory-definition-20060106132)
* [The Occult Technology of Power](http://www.geocities.com/johnfkosanke/occult.htm) The mechanics of institutionalized conspiracy
* [On the hunt for a conspiracy theory](http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1116/p09s01-coop.htm), *CS Monitor* article
* [Ground Zero with Clyde Lewis](http://www.clydelewis.com)
* [Conspiracy Archive](http://www.conspiracyarchive.com)
* [The A-Z of Conspiracy Theories](http://www.conspiracybomb.com/azconspiracy.htm)
* [Centre for Research on Globalization](http://www.globalresearch.ca/)
* [The Reptilian Connection — David Icke](http://www.davidicke.com/icke/temp/reptconn.html)
* [Above Top Secret:](http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum) The internet's largest conspiracy discussion forum
* [The Conspiracy Wiki](http://fnord.wikicities.com/)
* [The TinWiki](http://tinwiki.org/) A Conspiracy Theory Wikipedia
* [Top Ten Conspiracy Theories of 2002](http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=14873), from AlterNet.
* [An Introduction to Conspiratorial History](http://www.threeworldwars.com/intro.htm)
* Hutchinson, Martin, "[*The Bear's Lair: The new Cold War*](http://www.upi.com/view.cfm?StoryID=20031006-060121-9328r)", [UPI](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=UPI&action=edit&redlink=1)
* [Essays about Conspiration theories (in German)](http://verschwoerungen.info/wiki/Liste_der_Essays)
* [An Integral Approach to Conspiracy Theory](http://www.timboucher.com/journal/2005/07/24/an-integral-approach-to-conspiracy-theory/)
* [Interesting collection of conspiracy theories (in German)](http://verschwoerungen.info/wiki/Liste_der_Verschwrungen)
* [Sociopathy & Conspiracy](http://www.alienview.net/conspire.html) (...Conspiracy Likely As A Result Of Sociopathy?)
* ['Conspiracy Theories' and Clandestine Politics](http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/articles/l29consp.htm) by Jeffrey M. Bale in *Lobster Magazine*

**Links critical of conspiracism**

* ‘[The Paranoid Style in American Politics](http://www.nationalism.org/patranoia/hofstadter-paranoid-style.htm)’ [Richard Hofstadter](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Richard_Hofstadter&action=edit&redlink=1), *Harper's* [1964](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=1964&action=edit&redlink=1) November
* [Skeptic's Dictionary on conspiracy theories](http://skepdic.com/illuminati.html)
* [Popular Conspiracy Theories](http://www.conspiracy-theories-hoax.com/) (Balanced but skeptical view of popular conspiracy theories)
* [The Dynamics of Conspiracism](http://www.publiceye.org/tooclose/conspiracism.html) (site critical of conspiracy theories that scapegoat)
* [Amir Butler: Our Credibility Problem is a Conspiracy](http://www.amirbutler.com/archives/2002/11/15/12) (A discussion of the spread of conspiracy theories in the Muslim community)

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