

# *The Battle of Knowledge and its Implications for a Western World Culture*

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Within the past few decades, conspiracy theory has drawn the attention of sociologists, historians, psychologists, and scholars alike. Conspiracy theorists' use of violence in recent years, such as in the cases of the Oklahoma City Bombing and the Unabomber attacks, have brought conspiracy theory to a matter of public concern. Before the recent surge of interest in conspiracy theory, historians (such as Richard Hofstadter) and analysts (such as Michael Shermer) have regarded the beliefs of conspiracy theorists as irrational, their evidence dismissible, and their existence harmful to society.

While we must strive to understand the reasons why those like Theodore Kaczynski and Timothy McVeigh act out violently, it is also important to consider the reasons why an average person may turn to conspiracy as an explanation for events in their lives. Conspiracy thinking manages to wrap its tendrils around malcontent individuals from all sorts of demographics. Examining the communities in which conspiracy thinking arises, as opposed to disregarding conspiracy theorists as isolated anomalies "on the fringe," allows us to see conspiracy theory as a manifest cultural consequence, instead of a maladaptive thought pattern arising from mental deficiencies, whether caused by environmental factors, genetics, or both.

Conspiracy theory studies scholar, Peter Knight, in his book *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files*, attributes this rise in conspiracy thinking to the prevalence of conspiratorial rhetoric in media and on both spectrums of politics, to a general malaise over the superficiality of the capitalist lifestyle, and to a weakening in the idea that democracy and the American dream are safe, timeless, and destined to succeed.

Both Peter Knight and his contemporary John Fiske focus a portion of their arguments on the epistemological implications of conspiracy theories and their followers. In Fiske's examination of the

“blackstream”, the sphere of knowledge in which poor African-American communities often operate, he addresses the issue of “relative knowledge” in epistemology – the idea that knowledge is not objective, but rather what we perceive as true is based solely on the societal “grand narrative” in which we function (Knight, 152). The blackstream, a “metanarrative” influenced by the grand narrative that is America’s Indo-European, capitalistic, democratic culture, assumes that institutional racial inequities (such as the vastly disproportionate number of black males in prison compared to racial demographics in America) and socio-economic problems directly affecting African-American communities are both products of a conspiratorial plot on behalf of the American government and white society. This conflicts with America’s mainstream sphere of knowledge, in which a more Social Darwinist view is taken.

Knight goes on to explain that many of the people who adopt conspiracy theory as a way of thinking do so to provide themselves an explanation for their own tragic human condition and flaws, as well as hope that one day, their “truth” will make its way into mainstream knowledge and, perhaps, the inequities and injustices presented to them and many others will cease to be. Epistemology requires us to ask whether or not conspiracy theorists are justified in thinking that what they believe is “true”, and utilitarianism necessitates that we ask if conspiracy theorists, even if they are wrong, are justified in believing what they do for its personal, cultural, and societal implications. In this paper I will examine the validity of the concept of truth presented by conspiracy theorists, and illustrate the existence of a grand narrative, under which we operate, that rejects and seeks to eliminate such alternative belief systems. I will proceed to explain how the subjective aspects of conspiracy theory, the state of mind and thoughts of the individual, provide a subversive problem for this grand narrative. This, in turn, is a reflection of tension between Eastern and Western ideology.

The grand narrative of which I speak is blatant yet unexpected; though it is the basis of modern logic, though its methods are taught to children in school, and though it dominates the standards of the academic world, it is easy to pass up. What I speak of is science, or, more specifically, positivism. Positivism offers the world the

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idea of one objective truth, attainable only by way of culling thinking what are deemed untruths from mainstream thinking. These untruths are deemed so due to their failure to live up to the standards put forth by the scientific method, to validate and affirm what may be called “knowledge”. This concept, popularized by Karl Popper’s 1934 book *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, has grown to influence a vast majority of modern intellectuals. Popper, an advocate but also a critic of science (in that he emphasized the retesting of old hypotheses and theories based on new evidence), stated that, in sociologist Quentin Skinner’s words, “A belief is rationally grounded ... if and only if it has been submitted to a ‘crucial experiment’ designed to falsify it, and has succeeded in passing that test” (Skinner, 5). Should a belief be unable to be tested in this way, or should it fail such a test, it is to be regarded as nothing but misinformation.

The debate over the utility of positivism truly took off in 1959, after Charles Percy Snow presented his Rede Lecture, entitled *The Two Cultures*. Snow makes a distinction between two groups, “cultures”, present in the academic community – “Literary intellectuals at one pole – at the other scientists.... Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension – sometimes ... hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding” (4). Snow continues on to express his dissatisfaction with this arrangement, and, as both a writer and a man of science, calls for a unity between the two, to form the “Third Culture”. However, it is clear that he favors the scientists; he shows a strong leaning toward the notion that “literary intellectuals”, intellectuals in the fields of literature, philosophy, and the humanities, are the problem. Snow devotes a portion of his lecture, entitled “Intellectuals as Natural Luddites”, to make such broad claims as, “If we forget the scientific culture, then the rest of western intellectuals have never tried, wanted, or been able to understand the industrial revolution, much less accept it” (23). He paints scientists as the victims of an oppressive regime run by conservative technophobes, and, in turn, calls for a compromise between the two – a “third culture” should utilize the scientific method to analyze and quantify questions and problems posed by the humanities of the “literary intellectuals”. Obviously, this

does not provide ample breathing room for the literary intellectuals to exercise their methods of inquiry.

F. R. Leavis, a contemporary of Snow and author of *The Two cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow*, calls his views – and authority – into question. He notes that Snow, while claiming to be a bridge between cultures, has not produced anything of import in either field. His utilization of science in his novels is superficial, and what he knows of it does not go beyond a rudimentary understanding. Leavis states that Snow’s view on literary intellectuals is rather questionable; artists and writers are often the first to question the prevailing world-views of the time, as opposed to being change-fearing conservatives set in their old ways. Snow, cursorily examining literary movements like transcendentalism, draws the conclusion that literary intellectuals are unconcerned with others and remain preoccupied musing on their own “tragic individual condition”, while valiant scientists “see no reason why, just because the individual condition is tragic, so must the social condition be” (Leavis, 19). Leavis, however, argues that there can be no such social condition so estranged from that of the individual. He proceeds to contend that Snow, by placing the needs of the society above those of the individual, makes “standard of living ... the ultimate criterion” (25).

At this point it is important to take note of the context in which Snow was writing. In a world still attempting to understand the implications of novel scientific discoveries, such as atomic energy, Snow and others believed it imperative to have subsequent generations make science their priority, lest the enormous power of such things as the atomic bomb fall into the hands of a select few. Positivists and rationalists of this era also held the fear that existentialist works (which would later lay the foundation of postmodernist thought), such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* and Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*, would serve to discredit the concepts of truth and morality with their support of relativism, and often pervading sense of nihilism. In an attempt to quell the growth of relativistic thought, positivists and advocates of positivism like Snow sought to create a method to analyze what might be referred to as “knowledge” in the humanities objectively. The quest to refine this method, which Quentin Skinner refers to as the “grand theory in the human sciences”, has

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laid the ground for the “science wars” of the 1990s and the “battle of narratives” we see today.

Skinner, in his book *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, laments over the state of modern positivism. Providing a synopsis of Thomas Kuhn’s work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Skinner states “that scientific communities rarely if ever espouse a Popperian ideal of seeking counter-examples to existing hypotheses and accepting as knowledge only such propositions as survive such tests. Normal science ... instead proceeds by seeking confirmation of existing theories, theories whose authority is generally invoked to dispose of awkward counter-examples rather than being abandoned in light of them” (10). For example, recently in the news a story stated that evolutionary scientists discovered that a more complex animal, the comb jelly, had come before the simple sponge, originally thought to be the first animal (*People’s Daily Online*, 4/16/08). However, I have not seen or heard any scientists question evolution, nor its tendency to increase in complexity as it progresses. The article alludes to the fact that scientists might add a stipulation to the case of evolution, that sometimes it does not cause organisms to increase in complexity, but there have been no thoughts as to whether or not the entire concept of evolution should be revamped.

This form of positivism has a habit of being rather intolerant toward phenomena that cannot be examined objectively and require humanistic interpretation to be understood. While positivism discounts questionable concepts like astrology and numerology because they cannot be subjected to a falsifying test, so it does to all concepts requiring human judgment, such as psychoanalysis and hermeneutics, and phenomena that can be understood (at this point) through experience alone, such as alien abduction and mystical states (religious ecstasy). It is the positivist’s goal, and that of the “Grand Theory”, to reduce these phenomena to quantifiable, objective parts. This clarifies Leavis’s fear that, should the positivists reduce the humanistic elements of the mind and consciousness to predictable, controllable biological and algorithmic factors, “standard of living” will be the sole issue in making decisions for humanity.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, positivism has grown to be the largest, or at least the most outspoken, school in the philosophical and scientific world of American academia. Spearheading this movement are, most notably, contemporary scientist Richard Dawkins and philosophers of mind Daniel Dennett and Douglas Hofstadter (who will be the “Hofstadter” to whom I refer from this point forward). These positivists seek an end to irrationality; however, their definition of what is rational tends not to sit well with the pious, superstitious, and believers in conspiracy theory. The publishing of such works as *The God Delusion* (Dawkins), *Consciousness Explained* (Dennett & Hofstadter), and *The Skeptic Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience* (by skeptic and author Michael Shermer) in recent years demonstrates a rising trend; positivists are becoming less and less tolerant of alternative ways of thinking. However, trying to convince someone who has been engulfed in what seems to be a living, fantastic reality, in which all sensory organs are intact and active, that their experience is “irrational” and thusly meaningless nonsense is quite difficult.

Victims of alien abduction phenomena and subjects of mystical experience are such people. When asked if their experience was “real”, most do not hesitate for more than a second to respond affirmatively. The adamant belief in their experiences causes the academic community to shun these people, all without investigating the matter. The most successful scientist to research these topics, while still being accepted in the academic world, is Dr. Rick Strassman, currently a professor of psychiatry at the University of New Mexico (Rick Strassman, 2006). After performing a five year study, beginning in 1990, on the psychedelic drug dimethyltryptamine (DMT) he proceeded to author *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, highlighting his research findings as well as reflecting on his personal opinions of the results. What sets Strassman apart from the positivists is his reverence of eastern spirituality – he even received a lay ordination in a western Buddhist order in 1984.

On the other side of the spectrum is the now-deceased Dr. John E. Mack, former professor of psychiatry at Harvard University Medical School. Mack, interestingly enough, was good friends with the controversial Thomas Kuhn. Being largely interested in eastern spirituality, visionary experience and alien abduction phenomena,

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Mack grew to be quite a controversial figure as he published his work; Harvard launched a 14-month investigation into his research, in an attempt to find reason to censure him. After the investigation, Harvard announced that Mack was free to his own opinions, and to continue his research. But why did such controversy surround him, as opposed to Strassman? Perhaps it is because of his standing at such a respected university, obviously concerned about its reputation, or perhaps he was simply more outspoken than Dr. Strassman (John E. Mack Institute, 2008).

Both Strassman and Mack were quite scientific in their methods; however, Mack entered into the situation with publicly known predispositions against western materialism, and was more public with his work than was Strassman. Nor did Strassman, unlike Mack (who has published books with such unconventional titles as *Passport to the Cosmos*), label his work as anything other than research into the pharmacological and psychological potential of DMT. The positivist institution stifles intellectual inquiry, simply if the area of inquiry is based on “alternative” belief systems.

However, this may stem from a subconscious fear in the minds of the positivists; were these experiences to be somehow verified as “real”, it would raise doubt in many over the ability of positivism to accurately represent the world, “objectively”. But first it must be asked; is this proof possible to attain, or even worth considering? Strassman notes in his book the resoluteness with which people stood by their DMT experiences as “real”. At the end of one DMT session with fifty-year-old subject Jeremiah, an assistant to Dr. Strassman remarked on how his experience reminded her of a dream she had. This was much to Jeremiah’s disdain. He responded adamantly, “That was a dream you described. This is real. It’s totally unexpected, quite constant and objective....It’s an independent, constant reality” (Strassman, 195). The experiences produced by DMT in the subjects, Dr. Strassman discovered, could not simply be converted into quantifiable data; they required interpretation based on context, and were certainly not arbitrary. Strassman also noted the similarity between some DMT experiences and reports of alien abduction phenomena, seeing recurring themes of angry reptilian aliens, sexually ac-

tive insectoids, and physiologically curious “grays” interested in probing about human bodies. Strassman, upon seeing the universality present in these experiences, posits that perhaps the experiences within the mind represent real, physical phenomena – we simply cannot understand it yet (311). Strassman, unlike many positivists, allows leeway for intellectual inquiry into such controversial fields.

However, drugs can also elicit experiences that are “unquestionably real”, but blatantly false. Such is the case with deliriants, such as *Atropa Belladonna* and *Datura Stramonium*. Their method of action is still mysterious; they are anticholinergic and block acetylcholine. This explains their effect of ataxia (coordination loss) on the body, but sheds no light on the delirious state they induce. This state causes utter loss of control of the body in relation to the outside world – words the user of the drugs “says” may come out as meaningless blather to an observer. The subject, utterly forgetting he took the drug, sees objects that are indistinguishable from real matter, and experiences fantastic events that, in their altered state, seem mundane and regular (Erowid, 2008). It is obvious that this delusional state is not corresponding to anything outside of the subject’s head. This calls into question the reality of psychedelic and visionary experience, and the answer remains indeterminate.

John Horgan, author of *Rational Mysticism*, a collection of interviews with various academics on the topic of positivism’s epistemological claims, interviewed Huston Smith, a preeminent religious scholar, on the subject. Smith laments positivism’s inability to comprehend the wonder of religious experience, and criticizes its followers for being intolerant of other “ways of knowing”. Largely opposed to globalization and the dominance of western culture, he states, “. He says, “The Western hunt for knowledge, analytic and objective to its core, has violence built into it, for to know analytically is to reduce the object of knowledge, however vital, however complex, to precisely this: an object”(24).

The best model of a “grand theory” that positivists have today is “memetics”, a system created by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Memetics is an analogy from biology drawn to information exchange and societal thought. The “meme”, analogous to a gene in DNA, is the basic unit of cultural information exchange.

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This is a rather vague definition. Loosely, a meme is an idea, such as a catchy jingle or logo, received by an individual by means of the media and other individuals, all operating in the “memeplex”. Memes die or thrive, only only the fittest survive, and culture evolves. (Shermer 652). However, that is where the analogy ends. Dawkins does not provide an explanation as to how memes are “selected” to survive. It seems difficult to think that there would be; memetics is simply another subjective interpretation of culture. Outside of the context of memetics, there is no existence of these memes, nor an application for them. Dawkins suggests that a meme is a second-order replicator, genes being the first, and, like genes, memes have the “will” to replicate. Genes use bodies as vessels to replicate, while memes use the conscious mind. One must question what purpose this serves; to what end does building up the memeplex march? It seems as though there is just as much speculation involved in memetics as in determining the nature of subjective experience and knowing what is “real”.

The largest “memeplexes” are the cultures of industrialized capitalistic societies. This contrasts sharply with the views of Strassman and Mack, both oriented more toward an eastern ideology emphasizing fulfillment of the self and a rejection of the western materialism, by which “standard of living is the ultimate criterion”. Dawkins, Dennett, and Hofstadter, modern day successors to Snow, prefer the growth capitalist culture, and perhaps even globalization dominated by western capitalist ideology. This puts the two cultures at odds, for by Dawkins’s standards the entirety of eastern philosophy is nonsense – Buddhist metaphysics provides only speculation on what is beyond death, and what the “true” form of reality is. Though eastern ideology cannot stand up to the rigors of the scientific method, it does have the support of the subjective experience of the few lucky enough to attain enlightenment. Should Dawkins refine and perhaps “perfect” meme theory, he could eventually sway the believers in the humanities. Right now, however, positivism offers us only speculation

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