

# Remarks on conspiracy theory entrepreneurs

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## Abstract

This note presents an outline of the social and intellectual conditions accounting for the rise of “conspiracy entrepreneurs”, that is these heterodox thinkers who make a living from their denunciations and revelations on the malevolent organisations and characters who really lead the universe. A special attention has been focused on the reports concerning conspiracy entrepreneurs in the media, which describe them as eccentric and thus entertaining. After the presentation of some studies of David Icke’s reptilian hypothesis, a question is raised: is it not legitimate to assert that academics studying conspiracy theories are themselves conspiracy entrepreneurs through their role in the spread of the subject of their studies.

## Keywords

Conspiracy theory entrepreneurs, David Icke, David Shayler, media approach, vampires

With the growing prevalence of conspiracy theories, more and more attention is being paid to ‘conspiracy theory entrepreneurs’, that is to say those conspiracy theorists who earn money from denouncing the existing order and from their revelations about the organisations and evil individuals who, according to their theories, hide behind the scenes. As these entrepreneurs make a living from such denunciatory statements, it is extremely difficult to estimate to what extent they really believe in their theories: it is hard to establish where the boundary lies between genuine belief in a theory and attachment to the discourse about it from which an income is earned.

These entrepreneurs fit several different profile types. The true believers, convinced of the truth of even the most extravagant of their hypotheses, are the most well-known because they are also the most active in spreading their theories. A significant fringe group of these conspiracy theorists consists of extremist politicians who sometimes use these theories only to increase their own visibility and attain their own ends and do not always really believe such theories are true. In the quest for fame, they try to push those who listen to them to act in protest.

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The initial intention of writing this article was to outline the psychological profile of these conspiracy theory entrepreneurs: which traits are shared and which are not, not only by the best known such as David Icke, Lyndon LaRouche and Alex Jones and by extremist politicians such as Thierry Meyssan or Alain Soral, but also by less well-known ones who repeat more than create these theories.

However, the facts did not fit the psychological portraits we had proposed to draw. They did however allow us to note, for example, changes in David Icke's behaviour since the flamboyant years of the 1990s: in his long and frequent presentations today, he is fairly quiet about the extravagant hypotheses<sup>1</sup> which led to his notoriety during that period and now prefers to talk about the importance of the mental processing required to decode what is happening around us as we are confronted with an elite that lies to us about everything and the current possible ways of reacting to these lies and counteracting them.<sup>2</sup>

On reflection, the appropriateness of such psychological profiling is debatable. Would one consider studying that of a scientist or an historian? No, because they produce work that adds to the sum of knowledge. It, therefore, became a matter of viewing particular conspiracy theories as merely the product of a deranged mind or of someone responding to the emotional comfort provided by their frightening, but explained, vision of the world, since their explanation allows the responsibility for the sad state of affairs today to be in the hands of evil conspirators. In fact, researchers and commentators agree on the comforting aspect of these extravagant hypotheses, hypotheses that blame the many dysfunctional aspects of our world on external forces and give those who accept them an active role in denouncing and combating the conspiracies.

Without widening the scope too far, it seemed necessary to link the growth of conspiracy theories to that of a whole body of alternative beliefs, termed appropriately 'stigmatised knowledge' by Michael Barkun (2013: 23–38). This is a body of beliefs where truth hides in lies to be decoded, where word of mouth takes us to the real sources; in short, it is the world of rumours and urban legends, filled with revelations and recounting doubtful stories as though they were true, stories that are often believed or repeated because they are different and satisfying in the retelling.<sup>3</sup> It includes the world of esotericism, which 20 years ago was referred to as the *New Age* and which until recently was held in disdain but which is today the object of study at recognised universities and the source of inspiration for these as yet limited sub-groups, although their audience is growing.

What needs to be explained, therefore, is not the psychological profile of conspiracy theory entrepreneurs but their very existence. We will begin with an examination of general social conditions. Increasingly, lack of trust and disenchantment is evident in both Western Europe and in the United States. In many of today's societies, alternative discourse is now unchecked and, in the perpetual present of today's society, our former repressions have been erased from the collective memory to the point where it seems normal to tolerate and to listen to the proclamations of conspiracy theory entrepreneurs, even if we do not believe them.

There have always been heterodox thinkers and they have always published their ideas. Some have indeed developed a following and founded heretical movements. However, the definition of *fous littéraires*, the literary cranks first identified by the Romantics and studied by Raymond Queneau (1993/1938, 2002), refers to forgotten thinkers whose unusual and original ideas were barely heard of before they sank into oblivion. In contrast, contemporary conspiracy theory entrepreneurs enjoy a significant reach and audience.

## The publicising of conspiracy theory entrepreneurs

Conspiracy theory entrepreneurs have been brought to public attention in a very specific way, which has allowed them to reach an audience who read their ideas, listen to them speak, comment

on them and sometimes believe them. The success of the creators of these theories can be explained not by the individual traits of the creators but by the state of mind of those who listen to them and interpret their theories and also of those who contest them.

The relationship between the alternative discourse of conspiracy theorists and the general public has largely been created thanks to independently-minded journalists who have brought them to the public's attention. These journalist-authors, driven essentially by curiosity, seem to have been fascinated by all these bizarre theories. One such is the American Ron Rosenbaum who, while rejecting conspiracy theorist hypotheses, has – since an article published in *Esquire* in 1977 – continued to state his theory of the role played in the selection of elites by the Yale University fraternity, the Skulls & Bones (1977, 2000, 2001, 2004). The London-based author of the remarkable *Them* (2001), Jon Ronson, also attempts to answer the following questions:

Is there really, as extremists claim, a secret room from which a small elite rules the world? And if there is, can it be found? (Ronson, 2001: flap text)

In *Them*, Ronson perceives many theorists as fitting in the same category: Alex Jones and Big Jim Tucker, who both believe in and search for hidden masters of the universe; David Icke and his polemic against the militant Jews, who see his stories of hidden reptilian masters of the universe as an anti-Semitic metaphor; the American police whose persecution of extreme activists led to an increase in the numbers of activists;<sup>4</sup> a Syrian preacher of Jihadism based in London.<sup>5</sup>

In a more recent work, *The Psychopath Test* (2011), Ronson revisits the subject of conspiracy theories in an examination of the case of David Shayler. Recruited as an agent by MI5 in 1991, Shayler was considered courageous for his protests following his resignation and revelation in 1997 of a plot by MI6 to assassinate Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi.<sup>6</sup> He was paid £20,000 by the *Mail on Sunday* for his revelations. Shayler was arrested in 1998 in France, where he was in hiding with his girlfriend, who was also a member of MI5. He spent 4 months in La Santé Prison in Paris and another month in prison in England before being released. In 2002, he was convicted and received a light sentence for revealing State secrets.

Convinced that the Islamist attacks of 11 September 2001 and then the London underground attacks of 7 July 2005 had been organised by the American administration with the complicity of MI5 and MI6, Shayler, with his girlfriend, became prominent in the British Truth Movement. He had frequent meetings with Alex Jones, who was broadcasting a radio programme with a large audience in the United States, and appeared at meetings<sup>7</sup> of the movement.

However, it was only when Shayler publicly announced his extreme theory that there were no aircrafts involved in the attack on the twin towers that the British media gave him serious attention:

I ask Shayler if it's true he has become a 'no planer' – that is, someone who believes that no planes at all were involved in the 9/11 atrocity. [...] 'The only explanation is that they were missiles surrounded by holograms made to look like planes,' he says. 'Watch the footage frame by frame and you will see a cigar-shaped missile hitting the World Trade Center.' He must notice that my jaw has dropped. 'I know it sounds weird, but this is what I believe.' (Brendan O'Neill, 'Meet the No Planers', *New Statesman*, 11 September 2006; cited by Ronson, 2011: 207)

Ronson also talked with Shayler, who was very proud of his new celebrity and who boasted about his interviews but reacted with annoyed silence when Ronson told him that people wanted to interview him only because his theory was crazy. Recovering himself, Shayler announced that he was on the track of a much bigger plot:

the ultimate false flag operation, which is to use holograms to make it look like an alien invasion is underway. (Ronson, 2011: 208)

A year later, Shayler called a press conference to announce that he was the son of God, the Messiah. He appeared in a long white tunic, but only two journalists bothered to turn up: Ronson and a representative of *Sky News* who had no intention of reporting anything but who attended in order to have a record in case Shayler did something interesting in the future (Ronson, 2011: 209–212).

The celebrity of this changeable character worried Ronson, who wondered what type of instability the public finds attractive and interesting and what role journalists play in establishing the newsworthiness of these eccentrics. A colleague's remarks, which he had at first dismissed, then seemed pertinent:

“We all do it”, Adam was continuing. ‘All journalists. We create stories out of fragments. We travel all over the world, propelled onwards by *something*, we sit in people's houses, our notepads in our hands, and we wait for the gems. And the gems invariably turn out to be the madness – the extreme, outermost aspects of that person's personality – the irrational anger, the anxiety, the paranoia, the narcissism, the things that would be defined within DSM<sup>8</sup> as mental disorders. We've dedicated our lives to it. We know what we do is odd but nobody talks about it. [...] My question is, what does all this say about our sanity?’ (Ronson, 2011: 180)

I have discussed this particular case in detail because it is relevant to a process which is very widespread today and which has a strong influence on our awareness of conspiracy theories.

In writing up their stories, journalists have to entertain as much as inform, or even entertain more than inform. A story about something different is entertaining and amusing. Something that does not entertain is not worth writing about. An extreme theory about holograms is entertaining whereas someone who thinks he is the Messiah is merely boring or worrying. Similarly, the games of confessions, rivalries and challenges in TV reality shows are carefully staged and participants in them are screened by the organisers to provide the audience of these apparently spontaneous shows with amusement from viewing situations that are slightly exaggerated, foolish and entertaining.

It is through this ‘picturesque’ prism that we are often presented with conspiracy theories and those who defend them, in the same way as, in France, we are presented with heterodox beliefs such as the presence among us of extraterrestrials or the existence of yetis and other shy, hairy creatures.

## Analyses of conspiracy theory entrepreneurs and their theories

Left-leaning bloggers frequently interpret conspiracy theories as a metaphor for global capitalism. For example, an article which appeared on 8 September 2006 in the British blog *SchNews* concluded its analysis of ‘Truth Movements’ about the September 11 attacks with this observation:

World power is not a neat pyramid structure with aliens, Jews or a cabal of men with a secret handshake at the top. It makes more sense to see a range of competing power blocks, alliances and cartels in a shifting, perpetual power play – with governments, nationalist and business interests doing what they've always done, battling for control of land, resources, workforces and populations. There is one conspiracy that doesn't lurk in smoky rooms behind closed doors – it's called global capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

Jewish organisations have deciphered these conspiracy theories as being coded messages, stating that when they refer to ‘international finance’ they mean ‘the Jews’. David Icke has been accused of doing this in his theory of giant reptiles and, in *Them* (2001: 142–173), Ronson

humorously describes the failed attempts of the anti-racist coalition to prevent Icke's appearance in Vancouver. Applied to the giant reptile theory, this process of 'decoding' – which reduces the flamboyant notions of Icke to anti-Semitism alone – is just as reductionist and paranoid (it supposes that Icke himself leads an anti-Semitic plot) as the one it aims to combat. Just like an extreme fundamentalist Christian, David Icke always takes things literally: if the myths of many societies speak of serpents, it is because *there are* serpents. As for the race of reptiles, to him they are real (Campion-Vincent, 2005: 145). This process of 'decoding' can appear rational but it is in fact very similar to that of the esotericists for whom the world consists of levels of meaning to be discovered and deciphered.

Most researchers who cite Icke only mention him briefly. Others, such as Michael Barkun, produce in-depth studies of the thought processes of this 'New Age conspiracist', his ideas about Jews or his interpretations of the events of September 2001 (Barkun, 2013: 104–110, 144–145, 164–165).

Others interpret the reptilian hypothesis differently. Both LiBrizzi and Lewis and Kahn published works about this before 2005 (Campion-Vincent, 2005: 193–197). In 2003, Marcus LiBrizzi pointed out the link between Icke's reptiles and the classic image of the vampire: both creatures are immortal, drink blood and sexually seduce their victims, they can change their form, use hypnosis and are organised into secret societies. For LiBrizzi, the Anunnaki vampires of David Icke are demonic expressions of the particular type of capitalism seen at the beginning of the 21st century.

The figure of a vampire is frequently used as a political metaphor, and has been since Voltaire devoted a piquant entry to it in the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764), where the term is a symbol of exploitation:

*Vampires.* What! is it in our eighteenth century that vampires exist? [...]

These vampires were corpses, who went out of their graves at night to suck the blood of the living, [...] It was in Poland, Hungary, Silesia, Moravia, Austria, and Lorraine, that the dead made this good cheer. We never heard a word of vampires in London, nor even at Paris. I confess that in both these cities there were stock-jobbers, brokers, and men of business, who sucked the blood of the people in broad daylight; but they were not dead, though corrupted. These true suckers lived not in cemeteries, but in very agreeable palaces. [...] Thus, properly speaking, kings are not vampires; the true vampires are the monks, who eat at the expense of both kings and people.

In 2005, Tyson Lewis and Richard Kahn stated that Icke's pronouncements were a 'representative example of a popular and reactionary dystopia which projects all its contemporary fears and discontent onto these creatures (as the cause)'. But a more careful examination of Icke's writings led them to a different interpretation: that Icke was asserting that the end of the domination of these reptiles over humans was possible thanks to an alliance between the two races which would lead to peace. This interpretation points to the concept of a utopia based on the hope of an *ecotopia* 'in which the conflict between humans and non-humans, and therefore also between nature and culture, would be reconciled'. Taking a globalist perspective, Lewis and Kahn remind us of David Icke's diverse audiences, which are mostly English-speaking with a specific appeal in South Africa and Australia: his audience also includes the bohemian hipsters of the New Age and the reactionary fanatics of the right. Lewis and Kahn's study locates Icke within 'the extra-terrestrial conspiracy theory culture' and at the crossroads of contemporary mythology, the mythology of the Ancient Aliens who brought civilisation to humanity and that of a race of reptiles living among us (in particular, this is often seen in fantasy films; see *V - Visitors*, a television series from 1982–1985, remade in 2009, in which reptiles invaded Earth).

David Robertson's recent study (2013) skilfully explains the success of the bizarre Reptilian Thesis. This thesis removes the blame (for the human predicament of the *New Age*) from humans, placing the responsibility for it elsewhere. The idea of a human scapegoat is unacceptable in the global universe of the *New Agers* but there is huge awareness among them that the *New Age* utopia has failed to eventuate. This accounts for the significant success of Icke's writings and speeches.

With the current wave of interest in conspiracy theories within the social sciences, analysts and commentators are contributing to the dissemination of these theories. It does not seem too far-fetched even to consider them as conspiracy theory entrepreneurs. Certainly (for the most part) they do not adhere to these theories, but in presenting, commenting on and analysing them they ensure a wider dissemination of the subject of their research. Their publications, colloquia and interviews with the media reach the general public, which today is very aware of the prominence of conspiracy theories as a means of explanation. Some, depending on their opinions, see in these theories a significant danger to society, associated with a general loss of trust, and push for an attitude of opposition to them. Others detect in them a reaction, which may or may not be healthy but which is nonetheless inevitable, to the deceitful and greedy games played by the elite.

## Notes

1. Such is his reptilian hypothesis that a race of giant shape-shifting lizards, originally from the Draco and Zeta Reticuli star systems, are the real masters of our world through the actions of the Illuminati.
2. See the speech by David Icke at the *Oxford Union Debating Society* in 2008, [youtube.com/watch?v=MCWACJ78A8A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCWACJ78A8A).
3. See the double volume of Diogenes *Rumours and Urban Legends* (54/1, 2007) guest edited by Véronique Campion-Vincent.
4. This was the Ruby Ridge affair (Campion-Vincent, 2005: 57–61; Ronson, 2001: 47–95).
5. Ronson does not seem to consider the hate speech of this preacher as something serious, simply underlining the preacher's ridiculousness and vulgarity with typical British phlegm and humour.
6. The plot was activated but missed its target.
7. He attended the Axis for Peace Colloquium organised by Thierry Meyssan in Brussels on 17 and 18 September 2005 (Aaronovitch, 2009: 241–245).
8. DSM = *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, a controversial manual that describes numerous mental illnesses. The fifth edition was published in 2013.
9. The blog was discontinued in 2014. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20150417163942/http://www.sch-news.org.uk/index.php>

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