

Chapter 5

Fact Resistance, Populism, and Conspiracy Theories



5.1 Truthiness

In 2005, the concept *truthiness* was coined by Stephen Colbert, host of the popular satire show, *The Colbert Report*. Truthiness has been referred to as truth that comes from guts and not from facts¹ and is defined as “the belief in what you feel to be true rather than what the facts will support.”² The concept took hold. In 2006 it was declared word of the year by the Merriam-Webster dictionary. It was used particularly and critically in reference to the political scene of the conservative right in the USA at that time. Before Breitbart, the conservative right rallied around Fox News, whose biased news coverage was satirized by *The Colbert Report*. The show’s critical satire focused on how, especially in the conservative right wing and for then President Bush, it often was enough that something felt like it was true in order to be

¹Schlossberg, M. (2014): “One of The Best Moments On ‘Colbert Report’ Was When He Coined ‘Truthiness’ In 2005,” *Business Insider*, December 18, 2014. Verified June 10, 2017: <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-colbert-report-truthiness-clip-2014-12?r=US&IR=T&IR=T>

²Canfield, D. (2016): “Stephen Colbert Says Oxford Dictionaries’ *Post-Truth* Is Just Watered-Down Truthiness,” *Slate*, November 18, 2016. Verified June 10, 2017: http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2016/11/18/watch_stephen_colbert_hit_the_oxford_english_dictionary_for_ripping_off.html

accepted as such. And not only in the conservative right wing may gut feeling replace truth; this is a universal human phenomenon. The phenomenon of truthiness may find support in cognitive psychology. Through experiments cognitive psychology has demonstrated just how much political bias matters when selecting information and accepting it as true or rejecting it as false.

5.2 Inconvenient Facts

There is a tendency for people's political opinions to be decisive as to what they listen to and believe to be factually sound information.

It feels good to be right and have the facts on your side. Acknowledging that perhaps you are wrong is a different kettle of fish. If you receive factual information that does not fit with your views or downright contradicts them, conflict between this information and your convictions, opinions, and values may result in *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger 1957).

Cognitive dissonance is an unpleasant mental state. One way to avoid it is to be rather selective pertaining to the information to which attention is paid. This is essentially the story of *selection bias*. Selection bias is a tendency, documented through experiments, to pick information and information sources that fit what we want to hear or believe. We pay attention to what we want to be true and avoid inconvenient truths (Manjoo 2008). This is reflected in media consumption. Especially in the USA, there is a strong tendency for people to pick the media whose news coverage fits their political convictions.

A study in selection bias with respect to news sources has documented that more Republicans will read a news story from Fox News than if the source is unknown or, worse still, is from CNN or NPR. The same goes for Democrats: They too pick news stories based on sources, except they have opposite preferences and do not pick their sources quite so markedly (Fig. 5.1).

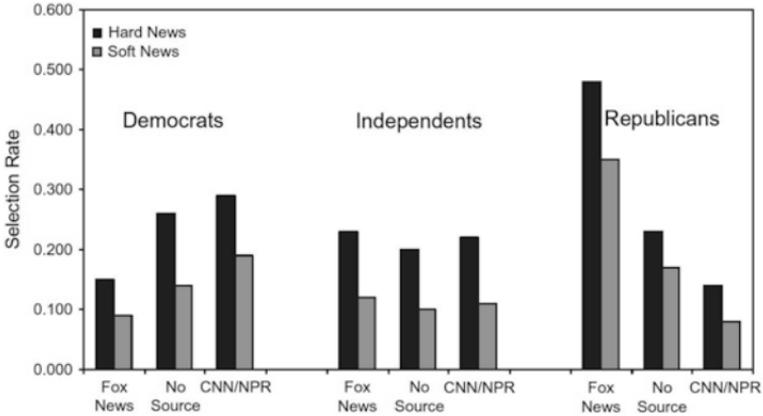


FIG. 5.1. Graph of the choice of news sources distributed according to political affinity. (Source: Iyengar and Hahn 2009).

The human psyche helps making politically colored news coverage a profitable business. Telling people what they want to hear sells news and attracts viewers.

If, in spite of your selection bias regarding choice of information sources, you are unlucky enough to be exposed to information that challenges your ideas with inconvenient facts, there is another phenomenon that may come in handy. You simply write off the inconvenient information that you are presented with as unreliable. That way you avoid the dissonance. This is what is referred to as *motivated reasoning*.

5.3 Motivated Reasoning

Motivated reasoning turns the relationship between ideas and facts on its head. Ideally, you base your ideas and opinions on facts. However, when using motivated reasoning, you start at the other end with a fixed idea and only accept the facts that back it up.

[Motivated] reasoning starts (...) with the conclusions and works itself back to find the 'facts' that support what we already believe. And if we are presented with facts that contradict our convictions,

we find shrewd ways of rejecting those facts. We are more devious defense lawyers than we are objective scientists.³

Motivated reasoning is a strong element in the distrust of science. It has been revealed that there is a statistical correlation between believing in an unregulated market economy and skepticism toward climate research and the reality of anthropogenic climate changes (Lewandowsky et al. 2013). The study offers the explanation that the claim of CO₂ emissions being a real and big threat is itself a threat to the market economy that depends massively on fossil fuels. The principle seems to be that it is better to distrust the reliability of the climate research than to revise views of the market. The same tendency to resist facts may be detected in left-wing politics when it comes to the impact of weapons legislation.⁴ This tendency is so clear that people's ability to solve math tasks is impaired if the result is not to their liking. Motivated reasoning must go deep if it even affects the capacity to calculate. Better to get facts and even calculation rules out of the way than to change your point of view and allow facts to disturb your convictions, political identity, and perception of reality. Why would one want to allow that if one is so convinced of being right?

An experimental study (Kuklinski et al. 2000) has examined the connection between political opinions and factual knowledge related to welfare benefits. The study shows that those people who have the most ideological bolstered opinions are also the ones who have a tendency to be most factually wrong. Notwithstanding, the study also demonstrates that those very same people are the ones to be most sure of themselves and convinced that they are right. It may thus be difficult to convince those that have the greatest need for a dose of facts. Given these psychological conditions, misinformation has it easy. And even more so when we become polarized

³Jones, D. (2016): "Seeing reason: How to change minds in a 'post-fact' world," *New Scientist*, November 30, 2016. Verified June 10, 2017: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg23231020-500-changing-minds-how-to-trump-delusion-and-restore-the-power-of-facts/>

⁴Klein, D. (2014): "How politics makes us stupid," *Vox*, June 4, 2014. Verified June 6, 2017: <https://www.vox.com/2014/4/6/5556462/brain-dead-how-politics-makes-us-stupid>

and divided into opposing groups, identifying with our tribe and thinking in terms of *us-versus-them*.

5.4 Loyal Lies

Truth is the first victim in war. The same is the case in a situation of (cold) civil war where the political landscape of a polity is so divided and polarized that the opposing fractions consider each other not just as opponents but as *enemies*. If tribal thinking, or tribalism, in which you identify strongly with a group of which you form part, becomes sufficiently prominent, then politics boil down to a friend or foe relationship in which truth, and often also substance, comes in on a very distant second. Then, it is only about winning. Telling lies and manipulating and spreading disinformation are considered fair game in warfare. If those in the opposing group, *the others*, are seen as an enemy, *blue lies* are legitimate and a way to go too. The expression blue lies is inspired by cases in which police officers have lied out of loyalty to the group to cover for colleagues, or in order to ensure conviction of an indicted person (Barnes 1994). Blue lies are lies on behalf of a group that serve the group.⁵ The lies may strengthen the internal coherence of the group and loyalty among its members. Those who are not part of the group, however, pay the price. If the loyalty to the group of police officers is greater than the loyalty to the law and the citizens, it undermines the rule of law; and if political loyalty to a political party, the minister, secretary, cabinet member, or President is greater than loyalty to the law, the constitution, and citizens as such, it undermines democracy. Since politics and population have become so polarized in the USA, blue lies may be part of the reason why so many of Trump's supporters do not seem to react negatively to the revelations of falsehoods and downright lies (Fig. 5.2).

⁵Fu, G. et al. (2008): "Lying in the name of the collective good," *PMC*, October 20, 2008. Verified June 10, 2017: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2570108/#R1>

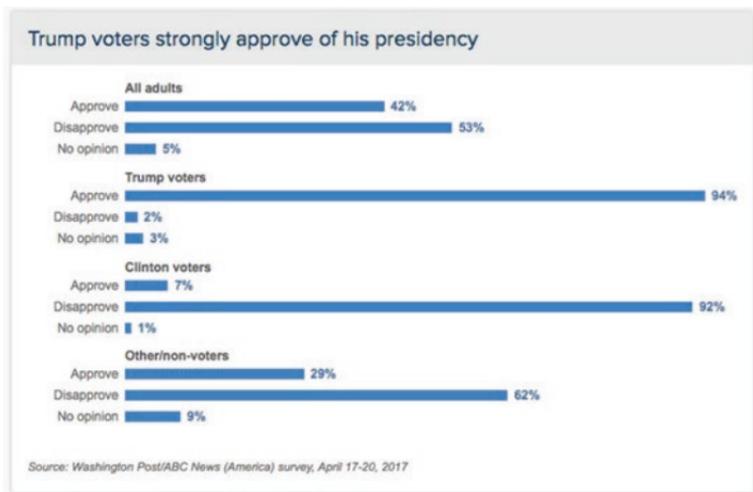


FIG. 5.2. Poll from April 17, 2017, shows a deep polarization in the evaluation of Trump as President. 94% of Trump’s voters applaud him, and only 2% are dissatisfied. Among Clinton’s voters, 7% applaud him, while 92% turn their thumbs down (Hanrahan, C. (2017): “Donald Trump: Is he the most unpopular United States president in history?,” *ABC News*, April 28, 2017. Verified June 10, 2017: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-28/donald-trump-is-he-the-most-unpopular-president-in-history/8469854>).

Trump’s lies are lies on behalf of “the movement” and in its favor against an enemy who needs to be fought. So says politics researcher George Edwards from Texas A&M University, who explains the lack of reaction from Republicans to the revelations of Trump’s falsehoods as a result of tribal thinking, deep polarization, and group internal acceptance of blue lies as legitimate weapons against the others:

People applaud lying to enemy nations, and since many now view those on the other side of American politics as enemies, they may feel that lies, when they recognize them, are legitimate means in the warfare.⁶

⁶Smith, J.A. (2017): “How the Science of ‘Blue Lies’ May Explain Trump’s Support,” *Scientific American*, March 24, 2017. Verified June 10, 2017: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/how-the-science-of-blue-lies-may-explain-trumps-support/>

When polarization is so pervasive and tribal thinking so prominent, they compromise the capacity for observation in the first place and then also the willingness to report truthfully what is observed. The factual question as to which crowd is the bigger one in two photos where the difference is clear (see Chap. 4) may under these circumstances become a political question, the answer to which depends on political affinity (Fig. 5.3).

Psychological bias phenomena and social psychological group and polarization dynamics not only cause fact resistance; they also contribute to popularizing, simple, identity-building narratives of us-versus-them. In addition to the

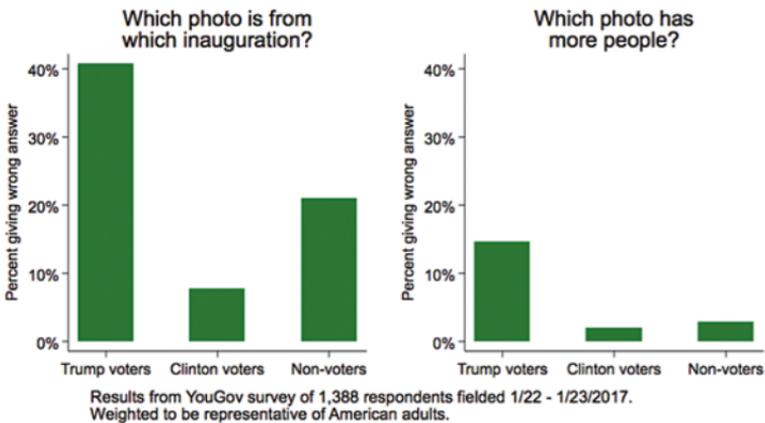


FIG. 5.3. Tribal thinking and polarization may cause strong fact resistance. 40% of Trump’s supporters believe that the photo from Obama’s inauguration on January 9, 2009 (the one with the bigger crowd on the left), was from Trump’s inauguration on January 17, 2017. Worse yet, 15 % of Trump’s supporters were even willing to claim (perhaps as a blue lie) that the crowd shown on the photo from Trump’s inauguration was bigger than the crowd on the photo from Obama’s inauguration back in 2009 (Schaffner and Luks (2017): “This is what Trump voters said when asked to compare his inauguration crowd with Obama’s,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2017. Verified April 28, 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/25/we-asked-people-which-inauguration-crowd-was-bigger-heres-what-they-said/?utm_term=.182e2c9af76a).

media environment, the human psyche is as designed for the populism that is doing so well at the moment.

5.5 Populism: Us-Versus-Them

Populism is not a specific political ideology, but rather a *strategy* whose core is the division of us-versus-them. Populism feeds off polarized and excluding narratives about friends and enemies. According to the German historian of ideas and professor of politics, Jan Werner-Müller, the core narrative in populism is that the populists themselves, and only they, represent the true will of the people, singular (Müller 2016). Take the French Front National's slogan "au nom de peuple," *in the name of the people*, or Nigel Farage from the British UKIP's (UK Independence Party) talk of Brexit as a victory for *real people*. Populism divides the population into the real people and the others. It also disjoins politicians into those who represent the "real" people (the populists themselves) and other politicians consequently not representing the people's will. Populists make a symbolic construction of a group they name *the people*, which is identified as exactly their own supporters and constituency. They claim to not only represent 99% of the people but rather all of the people, since the rest are excluded as the "others." Populism is anti-pluralistic.

Even though right-wing populism prospers the most these days, populism is not right-wing in and of itself. As an example, Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's former president, was a left-wing populist of our times. Before his death in 2013, he had run the country close to ruin both economically and democratically in the name of the people, socialism, and democracy. His opponents were proclaimed enemies of the people as well as of democracy.⁷ Turkish President Recep Tayyip

⁷Fisher, M. & Taub, A. (2017): "How Does Populism Turn Authoritarian? Venezuela Is a Case in Point," *New York Times*, April 1, 2017. Verified June 10, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/01/world/americas/venezuela-populism-authoritarianism.html>



FIG. 5.4. A tweet from Donald Trump in which the established media are presented as the enemy of the American people.

Erdogan follows the same populist recipe in Turkey based on a religious and Islamist ideology: “We are the people. Who are you?”⁸ If you are not with me, you are against the people, is the populist refrain. In populist understanding, political opponents are not seen as representatives of other legitimate opinions and viewpoints, which is a basic condition for a pluralistic, liberal democracy. Instead, the political opponents are presented as part of an elite systematically betraying the people, neglecting their wishes, and paying them no heed whatsoever. The opponents easily become the other, the enemy. The others may be immigrants who pose a threat to national security, identity, or values, according to the populists, or they may be the political elite in Washington, Paris, Berlin, or Brussels who betray the people by leaving the borders open and thereby selling out the nation and its legitimate citizens. The others may also encompass the media elite (and the fact checkers, for that matter) who are routinely accused of hiding the truth with the intention to silence the voice of the people and of producing fake news, when the news coverage does fair well with the populists in question.

⁸Müller, J.W. (2016): “Trump, Erdoğan, Farage: The attractions of populism for politicians, the dangers for democracy,” *The Guardian*, October 02, 2016. Verified June 10, 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/02/trump-erdogan-farage-the-attractions-of-populism-for-politicians-the-dangers-for-democracy>

In Germany, *Pegida*, a group on the outer right, has been explicitly utilizing the historically charged term *lying press* (*Lügenpresse*) when referring to the media. The political party *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) has been more moderate in addressing the press, yet without failing to deliver the same message by referring to the press as *Pinocchio Press* (Fig. 5.4).⁹

5.6 Social Transmission: Indignation and Fear

Populist, excluding, and polarizing narratives of us-versus-them are fit to attract attention and set the agenda in the media. Populism is an efficient media strategy that plays on emotions. The narrative structure of us-versus-them, with the others being villains, is efficient when it comes to mobilizing anger or fear. News stories that provoke anger (i.e., indignation)¹⁰ and fear have a much greater tendency to go viral and suck attention on social media (Berger and Milkman 2012). Negative emotions such as anger and fear and positive ones such as awe and fascination are called *activity mobilizing emotions*. They motivate people to act. These are opposed to sadness, or being comfortable, which are called *activity demobilizing emotions*. If a candidate's statements sadden you, this may demobilize you so you do not vote even though you find the alternative candidate much worse. Acting also means to share, retweet, like, and make other online gestures that fuel the social transmission of media material. If you

⁹Rohbohm, H. (2015). »Petry schwört AfD auf „harten Kampf“ ein«, *Junge Freiheit*, November 28th 2015. Verified November 25th 2017: <https://jungefreiheit.de/politik/deutschland/2015/petry-schwoert-afd-auf-harten-kampf-ein/>

¹⁰In the study Berger uses the concept category of anger, but the news articles categorized thus are rather about indignation. Indignation is anger about what seems to be unfair, as seen in these headlines: “What Red Ink? Wall Street Paid Hefty Bonuses,” “Loan Titans Paid McCain Adviser Nearly \$2 Million.”

want content to go viral, make people red-hot angry or scared. Populist narratives are seldomly totally cut off from reality. Citizens who vote for populists may be both indignant and fearful for good reason given tough and harsh facts they encounter. Rising inequality, social and cultural marginalization, and the rising difference between rural and urban communities, to mention a few, may all be factual reasons for anger and fear. Isolated facts and news may be cherry-picked to support a populist cause. This is one of populism's hallmarks: It simplifies cases and circumstances, cherry-picking facts, and framing topics as well as information according to the stereotypical opposition between us-versus-them. If facts run counter to that core narrative, they may be left out or reasoned away as not valid, with evasive explanations such as: "Even though statistics do not show a rise in crime, there has to be a rise. We simply cannot see it, so it must be a question of shadow numbers." Though shadow numbers do exist, and not everything gets reported to the police, automatically rejecting the numbers whenever they contradict your political agenda shows a basic distrust or disregard for evidence that may undermine a political debate carried out on a factually informed basis.

With populism, stereotypes often replace facts. Scapegoats and simplified explanations become replacements for the world's complex and often less than transparent cause and effect chains (Dahlgren and Alvares 2016). Populists also have a simplified answer to an existential or religious question that man has been shouting to the heavens as long as religion has existed: Why do I suffer?

5.7 Why Do I Suffer?

The pessimistic German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1778–1860) had an unpleasantly sharp eye for how man is a true master of suffering. According to him, our whole life is suffering in different forms (Schopenhauer 1966: pp. 473–479). We may suffer in many ways: from basic physical pain

and agony, thirst and hunger, sickness, and poverty to lack of recognition, fear, alienation, rootlessness, social or political marginalization, and stigmatization, to name a few. Suffering takes many forms, and the question “Why do I suffer?” is a basic, existential question that has been posed time and again, ever since Job did it in the “Book of Job” in the *Old Testament*.

The story of Job is a story of suffering. The innocent Job is hit by one catastrophe after another because God and the Devil have made a bet as to whether Job will stick to his belief in God regardless of massive misfortune. Job’s friends are not exactly great friends; they insist that Job must have sinned in order to be hit by such suffering. As they see it, all suffering is God’s punishment for sinning, and since God is justice incarnate, the punishment must be just: “...those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it” (Job: 4,8). They therefore believe that Job must necessarily be guilty but might have forgotten it himself, because you reap what you sow.

Until modern times, this was religion’s standard response: Have you been hit by the plague? Surely, you must have sinned. An earthquake? God’s punishment! That will teach you. This is theological *theodicy* tradition, which defends God as good and almighty in spite of the existence of suffering. The term itself, *theodicy*, is a compound of *teo* = God and *diké* = justice. It was introduced by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who added the philosophical remark that suffering is a necessary evil in the best of all possible worlds¹¹ to the traditional religious explanation of suffering as punishment. Supposedly, the reason man cannot see this is due to our limited perspective; but God sees it, and the Lord works in mysterious ways.

There are examples of more modern responses in classic literature. The French philosopher Voltaire’s book *Candide* is a satirical debunking of the perception of suffering as deserved or a necessary evil (Voltaire 1991). In Voltaire’s

¹¹ *Theodicy* by Freiherr von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, verified June 10, 2017: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17147/17147-h/17147-h.htm>

opinion, it adds insult to injury to preach that it is people's own fault or that suffering is a necessary ingredient in the best of all possible worlds. He rejects the idea that it does not suffice to suffer but rather posits that one must also endure additional suffering from knowing that one has brought it upon oneself or accept one's own and other people's suffering as building blocks in universal harmony. Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky's character Ivan Karamasov likewise rejects salvation for that exact reason: If the suffering, particularly that of children, is necessary for the salvation and the harmony of the whole, then he feels the ticket to Paradise comes at too high a price and says no thanks (Dostoyevsky 2002).

Even though the great religious theodicy explanations have gone out of fashion, without however disappearing from fundamentalist circles, the explanatory scaffold has lived on. It has been secularized and has found its way into politics and economics. The narratives that are being served to people stuck at the lower end of the income scale, or who have lost their jobs as a result of globalization, rationalization, and automation, are akin to the traditional theodicy explanations in their basic structure. Here are a few examples taken to their absurd extreme:

1. You suffer (say by losing your job) because:
 - (a) You fail to be flexible enough for the globalized market.
 - (b) You have no useful training or education.
 - (c) You are part of the "basket of deplorables,"¹² which was how Hillary Clinton referred to a large part of Trump's electoral base.

¹²At a fundraiser in New York on September 9, 2016, during the election campaign, Hillary Clinton said as follows: "You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? They're racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic — Islamophobic — you name it."

And this is why you largely deserve the situation that you find yourself in: You reap what you sow.

Even if you are one of the people who lost their jobs, globalization is generally a good thing, since it is good for the economy and growth in the long run. Your unemployment is a necessary evil in the best of all possible economic systems, which is why things only look dark from your limited perspective. In reality, seen from the view of the whole, it is for the common good in the long run and will create growth, jobs, and progress.

In the best of all possible economic systems the individual is rewarded according to its contribution and merits. The market is rational because the reward is proportional to effort: the income equals productivity which equals benefit for society. The wealthiest as well as the individuals placed at the bottom of the income scale harvest as they have sown. The growing inequality and the wage stagnation for the middle class are within this reasoning nothing else but a manifestation of a higher justice, of “just deserts” (Mankiw 2010: 17).



FIG. 5.5. The Trump badge with the text “deplorable lives matter” plays both on Hillary Clinton’s labeling of Trump supporters as deplorable and on the movement Black Lives Matter, which was formed in 2012 in protest against controversial police killings of African-Americans in the USA.

If these are the theodicy explanations that people in general have been provided from politicians and (neoclassical) economists, small wonder that they turn to populist narratives that at least do not belittle their suffering by depicting it as an illusion or even deserved (Fig. 5.5).

Populism employs a secularized version of the myth of the fall of man to explain suffering as something more palatable to the sufferer. Things have gone wrong, suffering has come into the world with the others (the immigrants, the political elite, the established media), and what we need to do now is return to the paradisiacal state that existed before the fall, i.e., “Make America Great Again!”

The populist narratives, as opposed to the theodicy narratives, have a simple and comfortable answer as to why we suffer: There is a scapegoat, a culprit to blame for most or all evil, and an implicit vow to remedy the suffering.

Q: Why do I suffer?

A: You suffer because of *them!* Because of the others.

And we, the populists, aim to do something about that!

This answer lends populist narratives an existential strength that is hard to beat. Nevertheless, their simplification of complex matters by means of a scapegoat entails that they lose touch with reality and cannot honor their promise of the imminent return to Paradise, at least not with anything other than a symbolic and elusive feeling of change for the better.

The main focus of populist policy is therefore to tend to these people waiting—to give them a reason for their suffering, to verbally recreate the post-factual world of their beliefs, to make them feel like they are moving forward. Populism is not a system of facts or solutions, operating in the complex world of policy and legislation, but rather an interactive fiction, borne of posturing and symbolism, where whole countries can become not what they are, but what they believe themselves to be.¹³

¹³Rondón, A.G. (2017):” Donald Trump’s Fictional America,” *Politico Magazine*, April 2, 2017. Verified April 26, 2017: <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/donald-trumps-fictional-america-post-fact-venezuela-214973>

When the us-versus-them structure gets further radicalized, it ends up in conspiracy narratives in which the others, the elite who wish us ill, operate in the dark and run the whole show secretly at a deep state level.

5.8 The Structure of Conspiracy Theories

Populist narratives may go into overdrive and become conspirational. If the other politicians and not least the journalists do not work for the people, then whom do they work for? A foreign power or a secret elite? Conspiracy theorists turn up the distrust of the establishment, which could be run by the enemy, the others, and they use this distrust as fuel. Thus, conspiracy stories and theories have the same basic us-versus-them structure as the populist narratives, but taken to an even more extreme degree. The others are hidden in conspiracy thinking, and there is also an even greater tendency to perceive the world unnuanced as a battlefield for an epic battle between good and evil that only those in the know can see. A conspirational conviction may be defined as being a belief that an organization consisting of individuals or groups is plotting and acting in the dark in order to reach a specific goal that is often malignant.

Conspiracy theories are not necessarily wrong. Watergate is a prime example of a real conspiracy, and there are also more or less shady secret intelligence missions, corrupt actions, clandestine operations, and unsavory political deals that sometimes come to light but oftentimes go unnoticed.

The belief in secret agendas may go into hyperdrive and become a paranoid perception of the world in which everything, give and take, are perceived as being run by the others. This turns critical thinking into conspiracy thinking, where motivated reasoning and fact resistance may thrive and misinformation is accepted uncritically as long as blame is attributed to the preferred quarters. An encompassing study looked into 2.3 million Facebook users' information consumption and established that people with conspiracy conviction



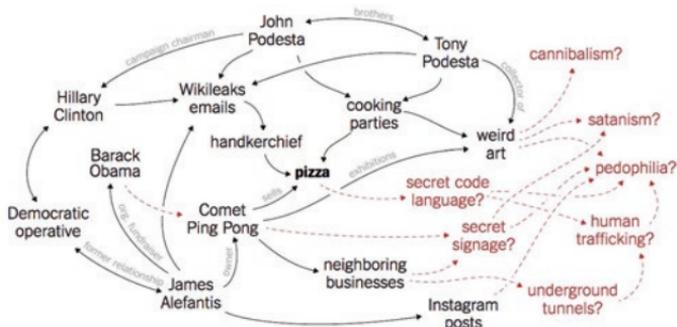
FIG. 5.6. Conspirational paranoia in the left wing where undocumented claims and fake news regarding the Kremlin-gate scandal thrive. Here is an accusation that Russia is behind riots in Ferguson.

tions have a greater than average tendency to accept fake news and undocumented claims (Mocanu et al. 2015). When a critical sense turns into conspirational thinking, alternative facts are swallowed hook, line, and sinker, as long as they come from alternative sources according to one's taste and world view. This does not only go for the American right wing, although it continues to be repleted with conspiracy tendencies. Ever since the US Presidential Election 2016, factions of the American left wing have gone into conspirational mode and seen Russian infiltration here, there, and perhaps everywhere. The election result is not the only thing explained as the result of Russian meddling; Russia is even ascribed responsibility for the police violence that occurred in Ferguson (Fig. 5.6).

The tendency to bring and share undocumented claims and fake stories uncritically, combined with distrust of the "mainstream media," seems to be part and parcel of conspiracy theories.¹⁴

Three principles are characteristic of conspirational thinking (Barkun 2013). Firstly, nothing happens by chance; there is always an (evil) will or intention behind it. Secondly, what-

¹⁴Beauchamp, Z. (2017). "Democrats are falling for fake news about Russia," *Vox*, May 19, 2017. Verified June 10, 2017: <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/5/19/15561842/trump-russia-louise-mensch>



Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories

By GREGOR AISCH, JON HUANG and CECILIA KANG DEC. 10, 2016

FIG. 5.7. The conspiracy theory #Pizzagate regarding purported sexual abuse of children in the cellar beneath Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C., where there actually is no cellar at all, managed to connect everything from handkerchiefs to Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and weird art to human trafficking, pedophilia to Satanism and cannibalism. (Aish, G. and Huang, J. (2016): “Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 2016. Verified December 17, 2016: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/10/business/media/pizzagate.html?_r=0).

ever happens must be connected to the rest, and that includes all news and facts that come to light. All of it forms part of a narrative in which everything fits, makes sense, and comes together in a coherent world view that often, however, loses its connection to reality due to its simplistic divide of the world into good or evil. If everything fits into a theory, most likely the theory itself does not square with reality (Fig. 5.7).

When everything is connected, and nothing happens by accident, then there are hidden patterns behind it all that explain everything. The task of the conspiracy theorist is to connect the dots between facts, rumors, and fake news with lines that reveal the entire wicked plan (Fig. 5.8).

Thirdly, according to the conspiracy theories, nothing is as it seems, and the official story is certainly untrue. The motto

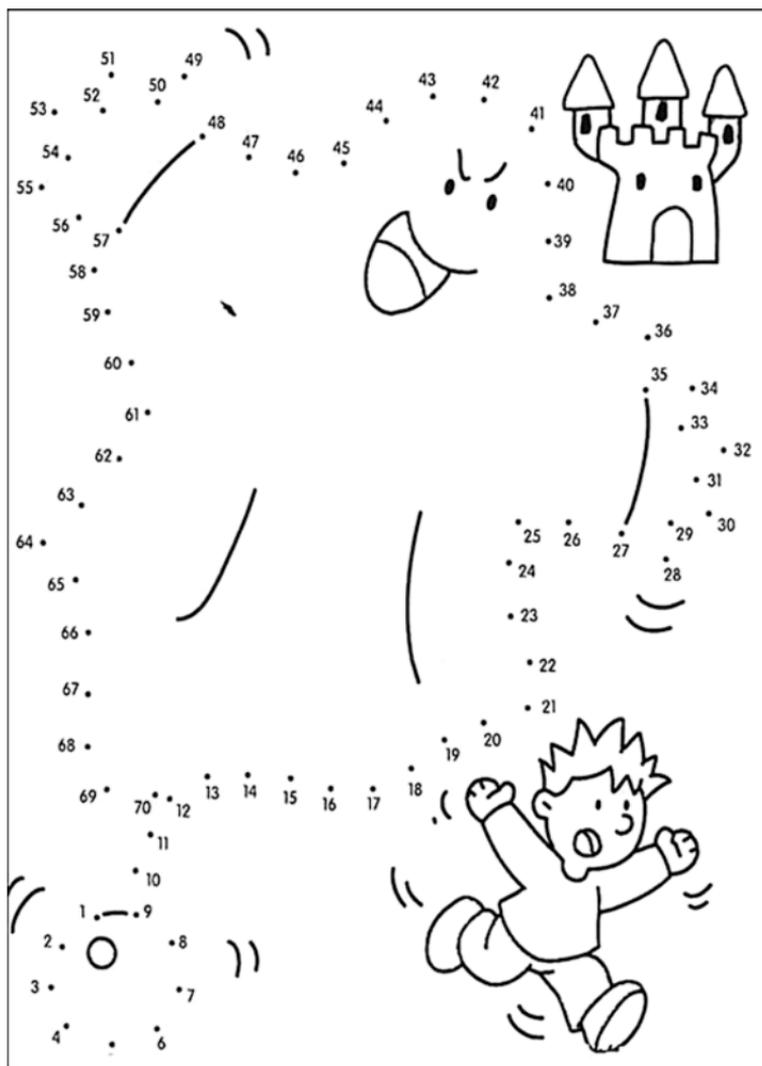


FIG. 5.8. If you want to see a monster, all you have to do is connect the dots, and you will see the outlines of it.



FIG. 5.9. Trump’s tweet from 2012 in which he declared man-made climate changes to be a Chinese hoax made up to destroy America’s competitiveness.

from the TV series *X-files* sums it up: “Trust no one!” This thinking leads to enormous distrust in the common and established knowledge-producing and fact-checking bodies, among them the mainstream media, the educational system, and the science and research institutions. The usual channels for information are thought to be filtered and controlled by the plot or active participants in it. In this way, every piece of information that questions the conspiracy theory may be written off as being planted by those that conspire to mislead you. This is motivated reasoning run wild. The heavyweight conspiracy theories cannot be falsified, exactly because any attempt at falsifying them is perceived as a trap set by the others.

The more global and all-encompassing the conspiracy theory, the harder it is to shoot it down, but the more unrealistic it is as well. The heavyweight theories concerning super conspiracies, where *everything* is connected and controlled by a secret world elite or deep state, ascribe humans unrealistic capacities to make long-term, secret plans, carry them out successfully, and resist to brag about it. Some of the heavyweight theories turn into a sort of occultism in which those who control the world are not humans at all, but demigods, reptiles, aliens, or other supernatural beings. It takes super-

natural powers to keep track of so much, have so many allies, and keep everything a secret.

One middleweight conspiracy theory is the one claiming that anthropogenic climate changes are a Chinese hoax. It is a cover for a shady plan to undermine American market competitiveness. This theory was proposed by Trump in 2012 (Fig. 5.9). It would require almost supernatural skills to carry out such a plot with that many fellow conspirators, among them almost all the climate scientists on Earth.

The argument Trump used 5 years down the line, on May 31, 2017, when he withdrew the USA from the Paris Agreement, the United Nations accord that aims to lower greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate climate change impacts, is composed out of the same basic conspirational melody. There is a suspicion of the others having shady intentions of undermining the American economy. These intentions differ from the official reason given, which is to mitigate the rise in temperature:

This agreement is less about the climate and more about other countries gaining a financial advantage over the United States. The rest of the world applauded when we signed the Paris Agreement — they went wild; they were so happy — for the simple reason that it put our country, the United States of America, which we all love, at a very, very big economic disadvantage. A cynic would say the obvious reason for economic competitors and their wish to see us remain in the agreement is so that we continue to suffer this self-inflicted major economic wound.¹⁵

Apparently, the Paris Agreement is not about the climate at all. It is only a front, a shady official story that covers up villainous intentions of hitting the American economy. And it is a plan in which the whole world must have ganged up to carry out. If this was actually the case, then NASA would be part of the conspiracy. NASA describes man-made climate changes as a fact beyond any reasonable doubt: The evidence is too

¹⁵ Read: Trump's speech announcing withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change, *CNN*, June 01, 2017. Verified June 10, 2017: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/01/politics/trump-paris-agreement-speech/index.html>

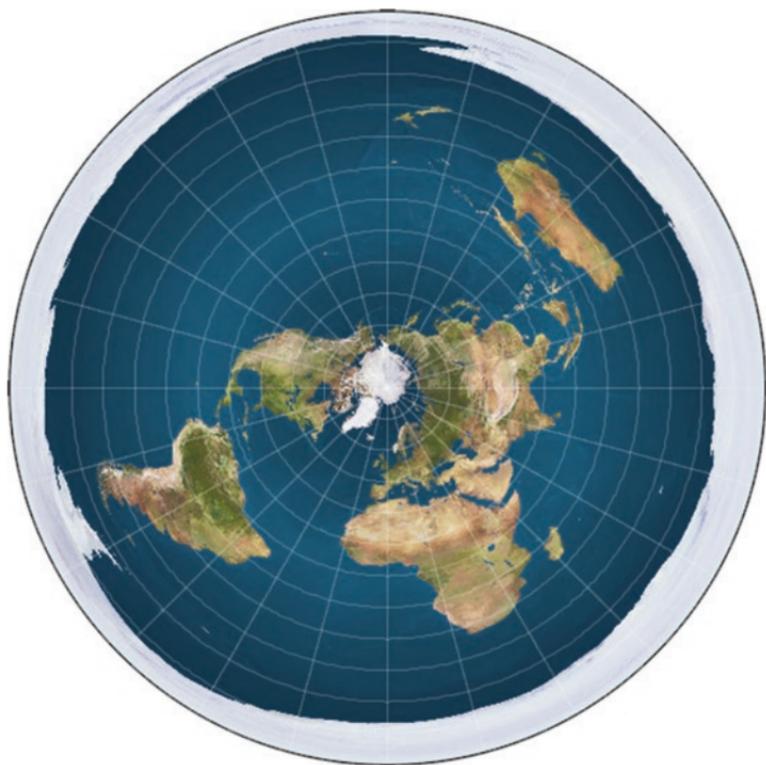


FIG. 5.10. Flat Earth Society's world map. Antarctica is not depicted as the southernmost continent, containing the south pole, but instead as a ring with a tall and impassable wall surrounding the flat Earth disc.

strong.¹⁶ But wait a minute. Was it not NASA who faked the moonlanding in a film studio? How can we trust them on anything?

If distrust in the knowledge institutions grows deep enough, it may end in a skepticism so comprehensive that even the fact that the Earth is a globe is not a given. This is the starting point for a growing movement called Flat Earth

¹⁶“Climate change: How do we know?,” *NASA*, verified June 10, 2017: <https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>

Society that insists the Earth is not a globe and argues that people think so erroneously due to the lies and photoshopped globe propaganda from a big villain, NASA. NASA is thought to have bribed every single astronaut to go along with the hoax and lie to the public (Fig. 5.10).¹⁷

On this view, citizens, politicians, scientists, and teachers who believe the Earth is round are either misled or themselves consciously misleading the public. If you cannot trust anyone, then what you may know or come to know is very limited. Have you seen with your own eyes that the Earth is round? No, you haven't. So how can you know for sure that it is? If suspicion and distrust metamorphose and win over people beyond small circles, it not only undermines science, enlightenment, efficient political action, and problem-solving. It undermines democracy itself.

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¹⁷The Flat Earth Society (2016), verified June 10, 2017: <http://www.the-flatearthsociety.org/home/index.php/faq>