

How liberal conspiracy theories can be just as destructive as their extremist counterparts

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Liberal commentators frequently condemn conspiracy theories that threaten public safety. The US mainstream media exploded in 2016 when an [armed man harassed](#) diners in a Washington DC pizzeria,

allegedly because he subscribed to the [QAnon](#) online conspiracy theory claiming that a Hillary Clinton-connected pedophile ring was operating from the restaurant.

British media reacted similarly in 2020 to a man who [destroyed a 5G mast](#) for fear it was spreading COVID-19. Yet criminal as these actions were, their negative impacts were limited.

But what if liberal [conspiracy](#) theories can be even more wrong-headed and damaging than their fringe counterparts? Our recent [research](#) explores this question in detail.

Conspiracy theories, right and left

Liberal observers often present conspiracism as the preserve of right or left-wingers. Journalist [David Aaronovitch](#) and philosopher [Quassim Cassam](#), for example, attribute fallacious conspiracy theorizing to the political "extremes."

This preoccupation with the conspiracist fringes has some validity. Rightist conspiracy theories are numerous, ranging from "[great replacement](#)" paranoia about the presumed elimination of white populations in the west, to the supposed machinations of 'bogeymen' such as [George Soros](#), whose philanthropy is blamed for funding progressive causes like Black Lives Matter.

Right-wing conspiracism relies on [simplistic narratives](#) of good versus evil, as well as sexist, racist and nationalist [othering](#).

Left-wing conspiracists, meanwhile, include those who overestimate the role of western interference in foreign protests. For instance, recent pro-democracy uprisings in [Hong Kong](#) and [Iran](#) were often dismissed as western-orchestrated actions by pundits on platforms such as RT, the

Russian news network. According to academic [Grażyna Piechota](#), RT is guilty of "building a conspiracy message [and] using it as a political instrument."

Older and more damaging are left-wing conspiracy theories of an antisemitic nature—rightly dubbed "[the socialism of fools](#)"—which have blamed international Jewish wealth and power for injustice, corruption and unemployment.

Combating Corbyn

[Dave Rich](#), head of policy at the [Community Security Trust](#) (an organization set up to protect the Jewish community) argues that, "most left-wing people are not antisemitic and, overall, the left's history of opposing antisemitism outweighs its history of indulging it."

But this didn't stop exaggerated and indeed conspiratorial antisemitism allegations emerging from the British political center in the mid-2010s to discredit then-Labor party leader Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters.

While antisemitism has been proven to be a [scourge across all political parties](#) in Britain and there was indeed a cluster of actionable cases of antisemitism among Labor members at the time, just [0.3% of more than 500,000 members](#) in 2018–19 faced such charges, according to [Glasgow University Media Group's](#) Greg Philo and his co-authors.

Nonetheless, Corbyn's critics asserted that anti-Jewish racism was rife among the party's rank and file. Their statements involved fiery and excessive rhetoric—exactly what liberal "[debunkers](#)" decry in left and right-wing conspiracism.

Corbyn was accused by centrist Labor MP Ruth Smeeth of making the party "[unsafe for Jews](#)" and by liberal Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of [risking](#) "engulfing Britain in ... flames of hatred." Sacks went further by

likening Corbyn to the infamous racist politician Enoch Powell.

Another feature of irrational conspiracy theorizing—right, left or center—is misinformation. In their [rigorous examination](#) of the situation, *Bad News for Labor: Antisemitism, The Party And Public Belief*, Philo and his co-authors uncovered the liberal media's various "reporting errors" and its inflation of the number of members disciplined for antisemitism. The [effect on public opinion](#) was such that, "on average people believed that a third of Labor Party members had been reported for antisemitism."

Philo and his colleagues also noted the efforts made by anti-Corbynites to [conflate](#) the Labor leader's longstanding criticisms of the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories with anti-Jewish racism.

Corbyn himself repeatedly [denied](#) accusations of institutional antisemitism in the party but was suspended for claiming that such charges were "dramatically overstated for political reasons." Leaked documents from within Labor and an [Al Jazeera investigative report](#) found that antisemitism had been "weaponized" against Corbyn by his adversaries.

In 2016, both the [Chakrabarty Report](#) and the [Parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee](#) inquiry concluded that there was, in the words of the latter, "no reliable, [empirical evidence](#) to support the notion that there is a higher prevalence of antisemitic attitudes within the Labor Party than any other political party."

Trying to topple Trump

Throughout Donald Trump's presidency, information including a dossier compiled by former British spy Christopher Steele posited collusion between Trump's aides and Russian operatives, and the [involvement of](#)

[Trump ally Anthony Scaramucci](#) in a Russian hedge fund. There were even claims about Trump cavorting with Russian prostitutes in a Moscow hotel room.

While US liberal media outlets CNN and MSNBC promoted these rumors, they turned out to be [mostly baseless](#). CNN [sacked three journalists](#) over the Scaramucci inaccuracies, while special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation [found no evidence](#) of Russian interference in US politics.

These liberal conspiracy theories about Trump and Corbyn are as simplistic and fallacious as much leftist and rightist conspiracism because they too often ignore wider economic and political contexts.

The antisemitism slur allowed the liberal media to overlook the Corbyn project's [widespread popularity](#) among voters disaffected with the [neoliberal settlement](#)—the downscaling of state responsibility and the increased power of the markets—in which liberals remain invested.

In the Trump imbroglio, the obsession with Russian collusion excused liberals from acknowledging the [socio-political factors](#) underpinning Trump's rise, primarily the disaffection of many Americans in an era of declining wages and living standards.

Deadly dangers of liberal conspiracism

Conspiracism from the center can also have deadly consequences. For instance, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, described by US intellectual Noam Chomsky as "[the worst crime of the 21st century](#)", was justified by western governments' [false claim](#) that Saddam Hussein could deploy deadly weapons within 45 minutes. This claim was vulnerable to the "problematic evidential practices associated with conspiracy theories," as philosopher [Matthew XR Dentith](#) observes.

Irrational conspiracism has tainted the liberal case for many other western interventions from the [Spanish-American War](#) in 1898, when the US government wrongly accused the Spanish of sabotaging an American ship in Cuba, to the 2011 NATO attack on [Libya](#), which was justified by the bogus allegation that Colonel Gaddafi was planning to massacre civilians.

The human cost of these wars—at least 20 million lives, [according to one estimate](#)—well exceeds the damage done in the name of peripheral [conspiracy theories](#) such as QAnon.

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