
PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Conspiracy theories and flying saucers

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ABSTRACT

How can we explain the recent enormous increase in the number of conspiracy theories and believers? Since the 1990s, two trends have moved in tandem: the rising number of conspiracy theories and the growing alarm over global warming. Is there some connection between these two trends? Looking to the 1950s, according to C. G. Jung, there was a connection between the number of sightings of flying saucers and the threat of nuclear war. His analysis serves as a template for our study of conspiracy theories, relying on the psychological processes of repression, projection, compensation, and dissociation. This article begins with a review of Jung's study and then applies his approach to understand the current explosion of conspiracy theories.

KEYWORDS: conspiracy theories; flying saucers; projection; Jung; archetypes; climate change

C. G. Jung would consider a conspiracy theory to be a political 'myth' accompanied by 'emotional tension' due to a 'situation of collective stress' such as the threat of climate change (Jung, 2002, p. 7). Building on Jung's concept of the 'living myth', a political myth would be a 'visionary rumour' about politics. At the present time, the general public is often sceptical about governmental pronouncements, which the public view as cover-ups and distortions aimed at bolstering popular support and excusing the blunders of office-holders. People feel deceived by 'fake news' about the state of the economy, racial strife, and mass shootings, for example.

A sceptical public is ready for alternative explanations of events, often provided in the guise of political 'myths' invented by conspiracy theorists. This readiness grows from emotional tension and a situation of collective stress: the threat of climate change to human survival. Adding to scientists' acknowledgment of this threat, many react emotionally to news of catastrophic weather conditions such as floods and droughts. Political climate change in the USA also contributes to emotional tension: such as the polarized partisan politics during the Trump administration, culminating in the attack on the nation's Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Jung often found psychological correlates of situations of collective stress. His explanation of the sightings of UFOs (unidentified flying objects) in the 1950s does precisely this: the threat of nuclear war, a collective stress, correlates with the psyche's attempt to deal with this threat through the projection in the sky of a mandala-like image, which 'protects and defends the psychic totality', the UFO (Jung, 2002, p. 16). The threat of climate disaster, a collective stress, may produce an analogous attempt by the psyche to deal with this threat through the projection of an image of secret evil-doers onto the so-called conspirators. Jung's book on flying saucers, then, offers a lens through which to understand the proliferation of conspiracy theories.

How can we explain the recent increase in the number of conspiracy theories and believers? The last three decades witness an explosion of conspiracy theories, including QAnon, which gained millions of followers during the Trump presidency. During this same period, climate change emerged as a top priority for world leaders and populations. Is there some connection between these two trends? In one of C. G. Jung's late writings, he explored the connection between the numerous sightings of flying saucers and the looming threat of nuclear war in the 1950s. While climate change consciousness has gone from ABBA to Greta, many people have become climate change deniers. Among these deniers, I believe, are the chief proponents and believers of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theorists are extra-terrestrials whose political fantasies originate in the depth of outer space, it seems to me. In this article, I explore the psychological origins of conspiracy theories in the depth of the collective unconscious. Using today's vocabulary, we see that conspiracy theories are more than 'fake news' and 'alternative facts'.

This is not the first attempt by a political scientist to understand conspiracy theories in the light of C. G. Jung's *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky* (2002). Jodi Dean's *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (1998) examines abduction by aliens. She states, 'Yet abduction involves the sense that things are happening behind our backs... We don't fight abduction; we simply try to recover our memories, all the while aware that they could be false, that in our very recovery we participate in an alien plan' (Fraim, 2013, para. 13). This is an allusion to conspiracy theories. The threat of aliens has largely disappeared, however, thanks to an *alien repellent* that is 95% effective.

Conspiracy theories attempt to account for specific political events. While some researchers examine their source and purpose, I adopt a macro-psychological approach, as does Jung, to describe the historical and political context in which conspiracy theories thrive. I present Jung's ideas in his book on flying saucers and then extrapolate those ideas to the current plethora of conspiracy theories.

For Jung, flying saucers are a myth caused by the activation of the 'self' archetype that is projected onto unidentified flying objects (UFOs) seen in the sky, having a round, mandala-like shape. This archetype compensates dissociation in the collective psyche. The archetype of the self is constellated by the great uncertainty and anxiety in the age of the Cold War that could erupt into a nuclear war with the extinction of mankind.

For me, conspiracy theories are political 'myths' caused by the activation in the unconscious of the archetypal 'shadow' in our age of uncertainty and anxiety in the face of an impending climate calamity that could lead to the extinction of mankind. Although many acknowledge climate change, others (deniers) repress this threat and their guilt for contributing to it. The threat and guilt are then projected onto others, as hidden conspirators who do us harm.

FLYING SAUCERS

While adopting a psychologically objective position on UFOs, Jung reveals his subjective position, namely, his two dreams of UFOs in 1958, the year of publication of his book on flying saucers (Jung, 1983).

To summarize Jung's ideas, I have organized his own words under three headings of my choice. Where necessary, I have inserted in parentheses Jung's missing words. To facilitate the reading of Jung, please note several equivalent terms Jung uses to characterize UFOs: visionary rumours, living myth, gods, symbolic rumours, and projection-creating fantasy. Under the following three headings of this section, the citations are from Jung's *Flying Saucers* (2002).

Projection of the Unconscious in a Threatening World Situation

It [the unconscious] does this [makes its contents perceived] most vividly by projection, by extrapolating its contents into an object, which then mirrors what had previously lain hidden in the unconscious. Projection can be observed at work everywhere, in mental illness, ideas of persecution and hallucinations... and finally, in extreme form, in political propaganda. (Jung, 2002, p. 8)

Projections have what we might call different ranges, according to whether they stem from merely personal conditions or from deeper collective ones.... Collective contents, such as religious, philosophical, political and social conflicts, select projection-carriers of a corresponding kind—Freemasons, Jesuits, Jews, Capitalists, Bolsheviks, Imperialists, etc. In the threatening situation of the world today, when people are beginning to see that everything is at stake, the projection-creating fantasy soars beyond the realm of earthly organizations and powers into the heavens [as UFOs]. (Jung, 2002, p. 8)

Emotion, Impending Disaster, Dissociation, and Visionary Rumour or Myth in the Contemporary World Situation

‘But if it [UFOs] is a case of psychological *projection*, there must be a *psychic cause* for it’ (Jung, 2002, p. 7). ‘The first requisite of a visionary rumour ... is always an *unusual emotion*’ (p. 2).

Though visionary rumours may be caused or accompanied by all manner of outward circumstances, they are based essentially on an omnipresent emotional foundation, in this case a psychological situation common to all mankind. The basis for this kind of rumour is an *emotional tension* having its cause in a situation of collective stress or danger, or in a vital psychic need. This condition undoubtedly exists today, in so far as the whole world is suffering under the strain of Russian policies and their unpredictable consequences. In the individual, too, such phenomena as abnormal convictions, visions, illusions, etc., only occur when he is suffering from a psychic dissociation, that is, when there is a split between the conscious attitude and the unconscious contents opposed to it. (Jung, 2002, p. 7)

Our earthly world is split into two halves. And nobody knows where a helpful solution is to come from.... Under these circumstances it would not be at all surprising if those sections of the community who ask themselves nothing were visited by ‘visions’, that is, by a widespread myth seriously believed in by some and rejected as absurd by others. (Jung, 2002, p. 9)

‘One thing is certain: they [UFOs] have become a *living myth*’ (Jung, 2002, p. 11). ‘But the impulse to spin such fantasies ... springs from an underlying cause, namely a situation of distress and the vital need that goes with it’ (p. 12). ‘We are threatened not only by the hydrogen bomb but, at a still deeper level, by the prodigious increase in the population figures’ (p. 12). ‘The danger of catastrophe grows in proportion as the expanding populations impinge on one another. Congestion creates fear’ (p. 12). ‘From a fear whose cause is far from being fully understood and is therefore not conscious, there arise explanatory projections which purport to find the cause in all manner of secondary phenomena, however unsuitable’

(p. 12). 'The cause must strike at the roots of our existence if it to explain such an extraordinary phenomenon as the UFOs' (p. 13).

Activation and Projection of an Archetype That Compensates the World Split

My explanatory note: Archetypes are figures of the collective unconscious, the common heritage of humanity in the psyche. These figures, such as the hero, the mother, the dragon, the child, and the wise old man, convey both an image and an emotion. The archetypal shadow is one of these figures which can carry an image of the devil, accompanied by the emotion of fear. The personal shadow is a complex whose core is the archetypal shadow. This complex accumulates repressed and forgotten thoughts and feelings as experienced by individuals.

UFOs could easily be conceived as 'gods'. They are impressive manifestations of totality whose simple, round form portrays the archetype of the self, which as we know from experience plays the chief role in uniting apparently irreconcilable opposites and therefore best suited to compensate the split-mindedness of our age. (Jung, 2002, p. 17)

'The present world situation is calculated as never before to arouse expectations of a redeeming, supernatural event' (Jung, 2002, p. 17). 'A symbolic rumour ... activates an archetype that has always expressed order, deliverance, salvation, and wholeness' (p. 18). 'This attitude [rationalistic enlightenment, belief in this world, and the power of man] on the part of the overwhelming majority provides the most favourable basis for a projection, that is, for a manifestation of the unconscious background' (p. 18). 'A myth is essentially a product of the unconscious archetype and is therefore a symbol which requires psychological interpretation' (p. 19). 'The figures in a rumour can be subjected to the same principles of dream interpretation' (p. 15).

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

It is as if conspiracy theorists had been breast-fed by the mother of all fictional conspiracies, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2005). What about non-fictional accounts of conspiracies? I begin with an overview of conspiracy theories by Quassim Cassam (2019) before presenting my macro-psychological, Jungian analysis.

Cassam, a professor of philosophy, has written a persuasive analysis of conspiracy theories, applying coherent reasoning, selective references to psychological studies, and historical sources to outstanding cases of conspiracies. The object of the inquiry is the conspiracy, defined as 'a small group of conspirators who work together in secret to do something illegal or harmful' (Cassam, 2019, p. 3).

He presents a set of criteria that distinguish conspiracy theories (valid) from Conspiracy Theories (invalid). The valid ones respect scientific standards: empirical foundation and logical coherence. Conspiracy Theories essentially ignore, even reject, scientific standards and pursue a political agenda in the form of propaganda to influence public opinion. These Theories are speculative and contrary to official views of events (Cassam, 2019). Each one proposes alternative explanations of such singular events as the Kennedy assassination, 9/11, Sandy Hook, Princess Diana's death, and the Holocaust. I adopt Cassam's convention of capitalizing when referring to invalid Conspiracy Theories.

Cassam digests a number of psychological studies with the purpose of discerning why people support/believe Conspiracy Theories. He considers ideologies in playing a key role in the explanation of popular support. He defines ideology as 'a set of fundamental ideas and beliefs that shape one's understanding of political reality' (Cassam, 2019, pp. 45–46). The Conspiracy Theories that people 'devise and promote are those that match their particular political or ideological commitments' (p. 49).

Cassam emphasizes the harmful nature of Conspiracy Theories. They are obstacles to knowledge and to expertise. Also, as explanations that rely on the role of individuals, they can be a distraction from big social issues such as injustice and oppression, which need to be addressed as structural problems (Cassam, 2019). He proposes measures to respond to Conspiracy Theories. In keeping with the importance of political ideologies to which these Theories often belong, he suggests that those ideologies themselves ought to be criticized.

Many observers and Cassam describe specific Conspiracy Theories and the events these theories purport to explain. I adopt a macro-psychological perspective, as does Jung, seeking to place these Theories within an historical and societal context. Jung examines UFOs in the context of the threat of nuclear war following World War II. I examine Conspiracy Theories in the context of the current threat of a climate disaster.

In the above section, I presented key elements from Jung's study of flying saucers that I use here in the next section as a template for my analysis of Conspiracy Theories. I substitute concepts relevant to Conspiracy Theories in Jung's template. Where this occurs within Jung's quote, I use parentheses to set them off from his words.

Projection of the Unconscious in a Threatening World Situation

In Jung's discussion of UFOs, he singles out the possibility of nuclear war in the 1950s that threatened the future of mankind. Today, climate change threatens the future survival of mankind. These analogous threats set the stage for my extrapolation of Jung's thinking to the analysis of Conspiracy Theories.

For several decades already, climate change has been at the top of the world's agenda. Greta Thunberg continues to remind us that the clock is running out for global action to

confront this looming disaster. Scientists agree that climate change is at least in part human-made. Governments, corporations, and individuals are implored to play their part in dealing with this threat. The obvious examples of the consequences of climate change are rising sea levels, the melting of the polar ice caps, extreme weather, huge forest fires, droughts, flooding, the disturbance of the natural habitats of animals and plants, and air pollution.

In order to understand better how people react to this threat and how their reaction produces a wave of Conspiracy Theories, we need first to set out some aspects of Jung's theory of individuation. His theory brings together in a sequence several psychic mechanisms. The ego seeks to maintain a positive self-image (persona) by splitting off (dissociating) any attitude incompatible with this self-image and by repressing the attitude into the unconscious, where it becomes a component of the personal shadow complex. The innate orientation toward wholeness leads the psyche to project the shadow complex onto a suitable carrier or onto a dream figure. In a fortunate moment, the ego may become conscious of this shadow complex when the projection contradicts the true nature of the carrier. As a consequence, the ego may withdraw the shadow projection, expanding ego consciousness.

Surprisingly, many sceptical people everywhere deny the existence of climate change. Others deny that climate change is human-made. They echo Cassam's observation that Conspiracy Theorists tend to reject scientific knowledge and offer instead alternative 'authorities' to support their claims. To reject the overwhelming consensus among environmental scientists that climate change is human-made is to belong clearly to the unscientific viewpoint of Conspiracy Theorists. This *denial* of climate change accompanies a *repression* of this threat into the unconscious.

As Jung reminds us, the unconscious makes its contents (here, the climate change threat to humanity) perceived through *projection*, by extrapolating what is hidden into an object (Jung, 2002). Environmental scientists announce the threat of climate change, which once repressed into the unconscious, selects Conspirators as projection-carriers. Jung would consider a Conspiracy Theory to be a political 'myth' accompanied by 'emotional tension' due to a 'situation of collective stress' such as the threat of climate change. To paraphrase Jung, the whole world suffers under the stress of climate change and its unpredictable consequences. 'Projection can be observed at work everywhere ... and finally, in extreme form, in political propaganda' (Jung, 2002, p. 8), such as Conspiracy Theories. Cassam tells us that these Theories are vehicles for political propaganda (Cassam, 2019; Jung, 2002). 'In the threatening situation of the world today, when people are beginning to see that everything is at stake, the projection-creating fantasy [of Conspiracy Theories] soars' (Jung, 2002, p. 8).

Emotion, Impending Disaster, Dissociation, and Visionary Rumour or Myth in the Contemporary World Situation

We can equate Conspiracy Theories with political 'myths'. As such, they have an emotional foundation rooted in a psychological situation widely shared (Jung, 2002). There are nebulous events begging the imagination for explanations that may take the form of Conspiracy Theories.

Individuals often hold such 'abnormal convictions, visions, illusions' when they suffer from 'a psychic dissociation, that is, when there is a split between the conscious attitude and the unconscious contents opposed to it' (Jung, 2002, p. 7). Among Conspiracy Theorists and Conspiracy believers, this dissociation would be a split between the official explanation of events, seen as a deception, and the individual's 'abnormal convictions'. We can say that Conspiracy Theories, like flying saucers, have become '*living myths*' (Jung, 2002).

'From a fear [of climate disaster] whose cause is far from being fully understood and is therefore not conscious, there arise explanatory projections which purport to find the cause in all manner of secondary phenomena, however unsuitable' (Jung, 2002, p. 12). These explanatory projections can be Conspiracy Theories.

Activation and Projection of an Archetype That Compensates the World Split

The magnitude of the climate crisis evokes disturbing emotions in the public. The threat of climate change to human survival stirs personal and collective *fear*. The challenge to individuals, governments, and corporations to find solutions often goes unheeded. This is bound to stimulate both a personal and collective sense of *guilt* or *self-blame* for wasting energy, relying on fossil fuels, polluting the air, contributing to greenhouse gas emissions, and avoiding alternative energy sources. This guilt implies one's responsibility for these human contributions to the climate crisis.

Anyone who wishes to sustain a positive self-image of the 'good citizen', one who respects the environment and combats climate change, will naturally repress those self-images that do not conform to this positive persona. These repressed self-images will contribute to the personal shadow complex. This shadow then contains a repressed personal *sense of guilt* that accompanies the repressed *fear* of the future climate catastrophe (Jung, 2014).

We are on safe grounds in comparing the threat of nuclear war in the 1950s with the current threat of climate disaster. According to Jung, in such a stressful setting, 'those who ask themselves nothing [climate change deniers] were visited by "visions", that is, by a widespread myth [a Conspiracy Theory] seriously believed in by some and rejected as absurd by others' (Jung, 2002, p. 9).

Jung reminds us that ‘the projected archetypal figures can just as well be of a negative character, like images of the sorcerer, the devil, or demons and so on’ (Jung, 2014, p. 128). These negative images are projected onto a suitable carrier such as the conspiracy that Cassam defines as ‘a small group of conspirators who work together in secret to do something illegal or harmful’ (Cassam, 2019, p. 3). Jung hints at two reasons for the surprising degree of popular belief in such highly improbable explanations as Conspiracy Theories. At the core of the personal shadow complex, the archetypal shadow, when constellated, is both *fascinating* and *contagious* (Jung, 2014). This means that a Conspiracy, as the object of an archetypal projection of the shadow, excites a fascination in the believer. Furthermore, the shadow projections onto Conspirators easily infect the minds of others, thanks especially to social media.

As a rule, when the collective unconscious becomes really constellated in larger social groups, the result is a public craze, a mental epidemic that may lead to revolution or war or something of the sort. These movements are exceedingly contagious—almost overwhelmingly contagious because, when the collective unconscious is activated, you are no longer the same person. You are not only in the movement—you *are* it. (Jung, 2014, p. 88)

CONCLUSION

This article began with a question. Is there some explanation for the recent, rapid expansion in the number of Conspiracy Theories? The answer may be found in the coincidence of two trends over the last three decades: the explosion in the number of Conspiracy Theories and the increasing attention to global warming. There is, indeed, an explanation in terms that C. G. Jung offered to explain the appearance of flying saucers in the 1950s. Following Jung, I have applied a macro-psychological approach by examining the historical and political context that accompanies Conspiracy Theories. I also interpret Conspiracy Theories as political ‘myths’ in Jung’s terms. Jung says that ‘a myth is essentially a product of the unconscious archetype and is therefore a symbol which requires psychological interpretation’ (Jung, 2002, p. 19). Those who, out of fear, deny and repress the threat of climate change may become the most ardent supporters of Conspiracy Theories. This fear, once repressed, activates the personal shadow complex. In the context of the climate change crisis, the shadow is projected onto Conspirators as figures in a political myth.

‘The figures in a rumour [a Conspiracy Theory] can be subjected to the same principles of dream interpretation’ (Jung, 2002, p. 15). We can understand a dream figure as a projection of an unconscious complex, such as the shadow. I have treated Conspirators as if figures in a dream, whose fearfulness and guilt result from the repression of these emotions by those who deny the climate crisis. These emotions reappear in the deniers’ reactions to projections onto Conspirator figures.

A NOTE ON FUTURE RESEARCH

This is how I believe my idea on Conspiracy Theories can be tested. The central idea of this article can be formulated as a causal proposition: the greater one's denial of the existence of climate change, the more one believes in conspiracy theories. This proposition can be tested empirically by survey research on a random sample.

1. A filter question: 'Have you heard of global warming?' Only those who reply in the affirmative are included in the sample.
2. The degree of denial versus concern about climate change is indicated by the responses to a set of statements to which one 'agrees strongly', 'agrees', 'doesn't know', 'disagrees', or 'disagrees strongly' (Likert categories). Examples of statements: (a) 'the scientific evidence of climate change is unconvincing'; (b) 'global warming is natural, not human-made'; (c) 'climate change is cyclical and will decline over time on its own'.
3. The responses to this set of statements are transformed into Guttman scale scores (a valid scale requires a reproducibility coefficient of .80 or more).
4. The respondent replies to the question: 'thinking about conspiracy theories, do you believe in (a) none, (b) one, or (c) more than one?'
5. Finally, for the sample, the Guttman scale scores are correlated with the responses to the previous question on conspiracy theories.
6. To support the causal proposition, the expected correlation is positive: the greater the denial scale score, the greater the score on belief in conspiracy theories.

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