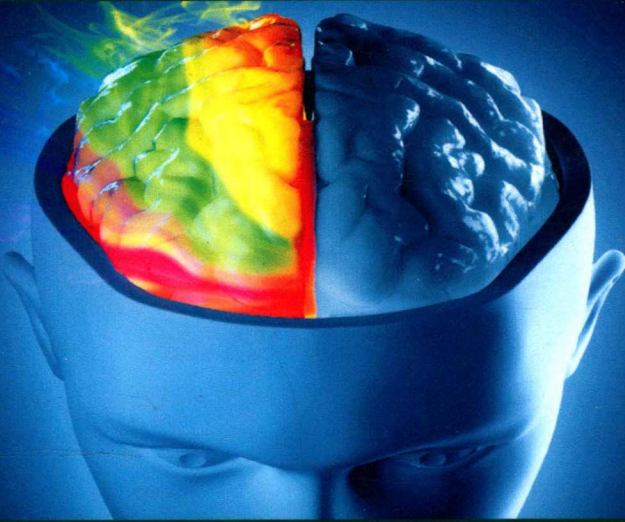


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Belief and Misbelief Asymmetry on the Internet

Gérald Bronner

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Belief and Misbelief Asymmetry on the Internet

Preface

This book will mention the media, beliefs, the news, the Internet, etc. but it should not be seen as yet another critique of the media system, exploring with indignant fascination the idea of a machination against truth set up to serve a society of domination. These kinds of theories, whether they pertain to conspiracy theories or, more subtly, to a self-styled “critical” way of thinking, have always seemed to me the expression of a form of intellectual puerility. This is not to say that attempts at manipulating opinions do not occur, or that our world is free from compromised principles, or indeed corruption; far from it, but none of this is the key issue.

In fact, reality somehow strikes me as even more unsettling than those myths, however sophisticated they might be, which envisage the media system hand-in-hand with industry, science and so forth, all in agreement to lead the “people” away from the truth. This is more unsettling, because the processes that will be described in this book and that allow falsehood and dubiousness to take hold of the public sphere are boosted by the development of IT, the workings of our mind, and the very nature of democracy... It is more unsettling then because we are all responsible for what is going to happen to us.

Introduction: The Empire of Doubt

On December 19th, 2011, I received an email from one of the coordinators of the *Reopen-09/11* website, who claims that the official version of the 9/11 attacks, the one maintaining that those murderous acts were fomented by Al-Qaeda, is questionable. If he wrote to me, it is due to the fact that, on several occasions, I have had the opportunity to show in newspapers, on the radio and even on television, how the mechanisms of belief we call conspiracy theories were at work. As it happens, I have sometimes taken as an example those individuals believing that these attacks have been organized by the CIA. There would be many things to say about that very polite email, if only about this apparently innocent and very sensible question he asked me: “Don’t you think that an independent investigation would once and for all allow those who believe the accredited version and those who are in doubt to come to an agreement?” This question suggested that the official report [NAT 04] had been written by dubious experts and it gave the impression, as often happens when an “independent” assessment is required, that my interlocutor wouldn’t be satisfied unless that assessment eventually yielded a report that would substantiate his theories. It so happened that what mostly drew my attention was the heading of his email: “right to doubt”, which indicated that its sender felt one of his basic rights had been scoffed at.

It may be surprising that this gentleman claims a right that, ostensibly, he already fully exerts. Did anyone prevent him from coordinating that website, posting videos on the Internet, publishing books, writing articles, handing out pamphlets in the street, organizing public demonstrations and generally

making his voice heard? Once this question has been asked, it is possible to admit to him that in fact the right to doubt is fundamental if only because, without this right, human knowledge could not rectify itself. If the scientific world were deprived of this right, for example, it would be impossible to envisage any advances in knowledge: the leading scientific theories would be deemed immutable and human progress would come to a halt, not to mention, naturally, the consequences the lack of this right has in the political field. But what this gentleman does not seem to realize when claiming this “right to doubt” is that, as is often the case with rights, it implies some duties.

Why duties? Because a doubt which intends to exist for its own sake and completely unrestrainedly can easily become a sort of mental nihilism, a negation of any discourse. It is possible to show that something exists, but it is impossible to show definitively that something does not exist. Now, this is precisely what the over-suspicious demands from any official utterance: show me that there is no conspiracy, show me that this product does not pose any danger... I can prove that horses exist, but I cannot prove that unicorns do not exist. If I claim that no one has ever seen them and that the existence of such a creature would be contrary to zoological knowledge, someone who mistrusts the official truth will easily be able to object, stating that science has often been mistaken in its history and that perhaps unicorns exist in uncharted territories, deep in thick forests, on other planets, etc. He will even be able to provide first-hand accounts of people claiming to have seen some, to produce some marks one of them might have left...

This is an example of that sort of sophism called *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, the appeal to ignorance.

As we will see, the conditions themselves of our contemporary democracy favor, on the one hand, the propagation of this *argumentum ad ignorantiam* through the public sphere and, on the other hand, the possibility for the person claiming the right to doubt to bury any rival discourse under a plethora of arguments. To return to the 9/11 example, let us remember that the conspiracy myth is supported by nearly a hundred different arguments, some having to do with material physics, some others with seismology or with stock market analysis [ANF 10]!

This situation will engender a mental maze with no easy way out for those who have no specific opinion on a given subject and, whether they subscribe to this obsessive distrust or not, they will be left with a sense of discomfort.

Generally speaking, when it comes to a number of questions, such as those concerning public health, environmental issues, economic topics, the exercise of political power, the spreading of information in conventional media, etc., a doubt seems to gnaw at our contemporaries.

This right to doubt seems to have become so invasive that those who lay claim to it as a kind of moral intimidation seem to forget about the existence of the abuse of rights. We will remind those people who may find this observation repressive that, on the one hand, nothing is more restrictive than freedom exerted unrestrainedly, and that on the other hand, the possible impact of this metastatic doubt goes way beyond the irritation it provokes in a sensible mind. Actually, if we think about it for a moment, the essence of any social life is confidence.

If we can live with one another, it is because we have the impression that a certain predictability characterizes communal living. Thus, when Mr A goes out to work, he hopes he will not be a robber or an assassin's victim; when he buys his cinema ticket, he expects the operators to project the programmed movie; during green time at the traffic lights, when he drives on confidently, he assumes that the drivers on the road perpendicular to him will respect the traffic rules; and he hopes, with good reason, that his letter, once mailed, will find its recipient due to a chain of actions carried out by workers he knows pretty much nothing about.

Many of these predictions are implicit (if it were otherwise, our mind would be overwhelmed by the mass of information it would need to process), because they are based on the experience of individuals who can, on average, rely on this predictability of social order: they are confident. This confidence is a very strong conviction, since it is based on an important aggregate of experiences, but it is also precarious, being only a belief. In order to exist, every social order needs this confidence to be shared extensively. It only takes several people to start doubting whether the others will stop at the red light for everyone to slow down at every junction and create traffic jams in cities. In general, it seems that the level of distrust toward political power is related to the mistrust of others which characterizes a population, as is shown by the large international survey by Inglehart and his colleagues [ING 03]. Just to take one example, Brazil, one of those countries where mistrust of politics is strongest, is also the motherland of person-to-person distrust, since only 2.8% of Brazilians declare that they generally trust others. The

consequences that the alteration of this belief brings about may be more dire. So, if in a highly tense political climate, it is rumored that some gunshots have been fired in town, a certain number of people may decide to stay indoors in order not to risk being exposed to the acts of violence of a sudden civil war. By doing this, they will help substantiate the idea that grave events are brewing, and will enter a cumulative vicious circle.

This is what might have happened in India on the November 20th, 1984 when in New Delhi rumors that President Zail Singh had been killed began circulating. Throughout the eight hours before the evening news, the city lived in a state of fear that the false piece of information could not have failed arousing. Traumatized as it was by the recent murder (October 31st 1984) of Indira Gandhi, public opinion was that Indian society was fragile and highly unstable. In these circumstances, a new political assassination might have had tragic social effects. Government workers, bank employees and some school professors left their workplace earlier than they were supposed to, whereas storekeepers pulled down their metal shutters and the switchboards of press agencies were deluged. Social order was threatened since everyone, ignoring what others were going to do, could see the mechanism of his or her daily predictions stop working. This rumor was dispelled once the evening news showed images of the President safe and sound, receiving visitors, and attending to his affairs. The anchor, who was aware of the rumor, underscored in his commentary that the President was perfectly fine.

What happened exactly? There had actually been a murder at the presidential palace, but it was that of a gardener. In the sociopolitical context of India, the natural interpretation was that, had an assassination taken place at the palace, it certainly had to be the President's. The city got off lightly that day, but no flight of fancy is needed to imagine how the situation might have ended differently. Confidence is thus necessary to any social life but it is also essential for this other reason, which specifically concerns democratic societies, pivoted around the progress of knowledge and the division of intellectual work which is its direct consequence. Actually, the extent to which each can hope to master this shared competence diminishes in rapport with the production of this knowledge. In other terms, the more someone knows, the less important *my* share of knowledge proportionally becomes. No one denies the fact that although a few centuries ago someone could master all of sciences, this could not be possible today. This means that a kind of society based on the progress of knowledge becomes, quite paradoxically, a

society of *delegated belief*, hence of confidence, which is what Tocqueville had written in his time: “There is no such great philosopher in this world that he does not believe a million things about the faith of others, and who does not assume many more truths than he establishes. This is not only necessary, but desirable” [TOC 92]. Indeed desirable because we cannot envisage a world that could survive for long, had everyone to verify frenetically every bit of information. There are however certain social conditions where this process of *confidence* is altered.

Western democracies are not, of course, in the same circumstances of political tension India was at the beginning of the 80s. We do not seem to be on the verge of a civil war, but in every sphere, the questioning of authority and the official word, and mistrust of the experts’ findings are tangible. For example, the results of the different polls about distrust are at the best of times ambiguous, and in the worst case frankly worrying. For example, a survey¹ on the feelings of the French about science, carried out in 2011, yielded contrasting results, some of which however betrayed that doubt about major issues gnawing at people. So, when replying to the question: “Do science and technology cause more harm than good?”, 43% answered “yes”. We may rejoice that 56% still reply “no” (and 1% “are undecided”), and that we find again the same percentages for the question: “Are future generations going to live better than present-day ones due to science and technology?”. However, we can also come to understand that that question is the expression of incredible ingratitude. Do those who have replied to those questions fully realize that life expectancy at birth was barely 30 years old in 1800 and that it was timidly reaching 60 at the beginning of 1960s, whereas it nowadays exceeds 80?² Do they know that the average temperature inside a London apartment in the 19th Century was 12°C? Have they forgotten about the plague epidemics or outbreaks of cholera or typhus which have killed millions of people? Do they not appreciate on a day-to-day basis the benefits of electricity, electronics or informatics?

This mistrust of science, which has been growing for around 30 years³, becomes even more evident when certain subjects, which have received a lot

1 A survey by Ipsos – Logica Business Consulting – *La Recherche* and *Le Monde* can be found at: <http://www.larecherche.fr/content/system/media/Rapport.pdf>.

2 http://www.ined.fr/fr/tout_savoir_population/graphiques_mois/esperance_vie_france.

3 <http://www2.cnrs.fr/presse/journal/1715.htm>.

of media attention and thus seem well-known to people, are tackled: for example, 58% affirm that they do not consider scientists to be truthful when it comes to genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) or nuclear energy (only 33 and 35%, respectively, have trust in them). Furthermore, 72% believe that the assessment of the safety of nuclear plants cannot be reliable. I know at this stage of their reading, many of those who are running their eyes over these lines will find these positions to be sensible and will not realize how doubt, expressed as such, can be excessive. If this were not the case, this book would be purposeless. As I will also say later, genetically-modified organisms(GMOs) appropriately exemplify the way falsehood has taken hold of public opinion. The perception of biotechnologie has changed throughout Europe since the beginning of 1990s [BOY 03].

This suspicion is not limited to science. Journalists, who are supposed to keep citizens informed, do not get a better deal⁴. Respondents actually think that journalists are not immune to pressure exerted by political parties or power 63% of the time and from buy-offs in 58% of circumstances. Television, which still remains the main source of information in Western countries⁵, has lost nearly 20 points in confidence since 1989: for example, nowadays, in France, 54% of people think that reality does not correspond (either exactly or approximately) to what is presented on television. Similarly, in the United States, 60% of Americans distrust the media⁶.

As for politicians⁷, respondents affirm that they only have confidence in 42% of cases and, if mayors get a slightly better deal than others with 54%, deputies only receive 30%. Besides, more than one person out of two does not trust politicians whatsoever, whether they are right- or left-wing, to govern the country and only 30% deem politicians to be generally quite honest. It is scarcely any better in the United States where 74% of Americans have no faith in government actions in general⁸.

While this survey attempts to grasp the state of mind of citizens, the results are not any more encouraging: weariness, gloominess and fear are

4 A TNS-Sofres survey carried out by *La Croix*, available at: http://tns-sofres.com/_assets/files/2011.02.08-baro-media-pdf.

5 As much in Europe as in the USA: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/163412/americans-main-source-news.apx>.

6 <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0912/81504.html>.

7 Cevipof 2011 survey: <http://www.cevipof.com/fr/le-barometre-de-la-confiance-politique-du-cevipof/resultats3/>.

8 <http://www.people-press.org/2014/11/13/public-trust-in-government/>.

growing whereas serenity, enthusiasm and wellbeing are dropping (in relation to the previous poll carried out in 2010). However, the term that has most noticeably increased is *distrust*: +6%, encompassing 34% of respondents. More generally, 70% think we are never too cautious when dealing with others and 38% that most people try to take advantage of others.

In general, individuals' trust in their political institutions has weakened a little everywhere [DON 05]. These kinds of results may be obtained in a number of Western countries, where unease is often a source of national distress. The last study by the Gallup International association, carried out in 2012 in 51 countries to measure the "morale" of different peoples, shows that somewhat paradoxically these ills do not spare the richest countries. We may well say that money does not make us happy but let us admit that it is nonetheless perplexing to realize this poll shows that French people, for example, affirm they are less optimistic than Nigerians or Iraqis, whose countries are threatened by famine and civil war. Besides the explanations that clarify these surprising results, it is rather shameful to see the predominant expression of a point of view which resembles that of a spoiled brat.

Those living in stable democracies, and whose freedom and safety are guaranteed, do not feel satisfied and appear to be looking for a way to be the *victim* of something. The victim status, as Erner has shown [ERN 06], has paradoxically become enviable in the democratic sphere. That doubt gnawing at us is able to offer everyone victim status: most often a victim of the powerful, who plot a machination against truth. For if this mistrust may be merely a widespread feeling, it may also structure itself into a condemning discourse. This is exactly what happens with the different conspiracy theories that seem to be making big comeback in the public sphere these last few years⁹. What do they consist of? A paranoid universe which can be defined by such expressions as: "everything is linked", "nothing happens by accident", or again "things are not what they seem." The DSK case, Illuminati, the attacks of 9/11, the earthquake in Haiti, our rulers replaced by lizard men, floods, etc. From the most bizarre topics to the most troublesome, the conspiratorial imagination presents the idea that some forces prevent us from knowing the world as it is, that some things are hidden from us. Considered as such, it is another expression of that mistrust which is spreading everywhere.

9 [CAM 05] [TAG 05] or [CHA 05]: the fact that these three books were published in the same year is a mark of the resurfacing of these themes.

Conspiracy myths are ever-recurring phenomena for the human imagination. First of all, because they conspicuously help our thirst for knowledge. These myths are based on a *revelatory effect* which really satisfies our mind, a sentiment resembling what we feel when we find out the answer to a riddle: it is a matter of giving coherence to facts which were up to then disjointed, of finding a link between apparently independent events by showing that they are tied together, behind the scenes, by a group or an individual's will. These myths are often speculative and thus easily stay in our minds. Subsequently they are easily memorized, which constitutes a major advantage for their propagation through the cognitive market. What is more, the endorser of a conspiracy theory feels that his knowledge is somewhat superior to his fellow's and that he is consequently less naive. Hence the fact that it is not always easy to convince him about the futility of his arguments, since he sees his interlocutor as the mediator of an official doctrine that needs fighting. If we add to this that conspiracy myths often flatter stereotypes or every form of subculture, it is easy to understand that we need not be irrational in order to find them appealing.

Examples of conspiracy myths are present throughout history: the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the notion that the French Revolution was fomented by Freemasons... The regulations of the Templars' trial itself could be seen as the set of laws of a conspiracy theory. Many events, be they fictitious or real, which cannot be explained intuitively, are liable to generate a conspiracy myth. The 20th Century has not been spared by this: Jews, Freemasons, gypsies, etc. have been, one by one or together, part of stigmatised groups, judged responsible for every kind of calamity: unemployment, cholera, inflation, political scheming, manipulation of opinions, etc. Therefore conspiracy theories were not born in the 21st Century, but nowadays seem to win over an unprecedented audience. Just to take one example, is it not bewildering, poll after poll, to observe the success of the 9/11 conspiracy theories? It may not be surprising¹⁰ to see that it is in Arab countries where this myth finds more resonance inasmuch as it is generally not Americanophilia or Israelophilia which characterise them (thus 55% of Egyptians and nearly one Jordanian out of two think these attacks were instigated by the United States or Israel), but it is astounding to realize that this belief is quite popular in several Western countries such as Germany, where the rate of those in favor of conspiracy still reaches 26%. The most worrying results are undoubtedly those obtained in the United

10 The results presented here come from a survey carried out in 2008 in 17 countries by WorldPublicOpinion.org.

States themselves, since a survey shows that 36% of Americans affirm they deem it possible or even very likely that federal officials have been involved in the attacks¹¹.

As observed by Campion-Vincent [CAM 05], while we thought the conspiratorial imagination to be confined to the reactionary way of thinking, it now seeps down through every layer of the populace, way beyond merely political themes. The second aspect of our contemporary conspiratorial way of thinking, she explains, consists of imagining the existence of “megaplots”, i.e. machinations with planetary ambitions. Everything happens as if imaginary themes, like pretty much everything else, became globalized. Some of these myths easily provoke mockery, as when David Icke, obsessed with lizards, envisages our great politicians as “were-reptiles” who descend from an ancient Sumerian-extraterrestrial race, or again when some defend the myth of the “chemtrails”, affirming that the wakes left by planes in the sky are chemicals designed by governments to manipulate the weather or minds. Some other times, they lead events to their bloody outcomes like in the Waco tragedy or in the murderous attack of Oklahoma City.

It is another reason to find their recent success disturbing.

Contemporary conspiracy theories, however different they may look, seem to converge toward a joint denunciation: the categories of collective anxiety have changed over recent decades. The example of John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s assassination emerges emblematically from this panorama (75% of Americans nowadays affirm that they side with conspiracy theories in this matter). Who is responsible for this murder? Answers differ: the KKK, aliens, the mafia, etc. but the culprit which hauntingly recurs over and over again is the CIA. The implication of the American governmental agency is not actually insignificant, since now it is seen as the ideal offender for any kind of plot, representing as it does the poisonous side of American power. Two malevolent and scheming entities emerge from the contemporary imagination when it comes to conspiracy: science and, more generally, Western governments and their secret services, often hand-in-hand with the media as an accomplice. Previously the ideal culprits were mostly outsiders or minorities, i.e. *the others*, which might have led to terrible consequences as history has shown, but imaginary fears offer new actors for the theatre of hatred and these actors may well be another version of *ourselves*, as the expression of a form of self-hatred, since science, as well as our rulers and the media, are emblems of Western contemporariness.

¹¹ <http://www.scrippsnews.com/911poll>.

The West, willing to bend nature and other peoples to its illogical and immoral desires, becomes the ideal culprit. For these conspiracy theories chance is an unwelcome guest, since they claim to expose the coherence of disparate elements of human history while denouncing those responsible for the misfortunes of the world. In this sense, the complexity of reality is always rejected in favor of the search for the single cause and we may as well worry about how the contemporary way of thinking sees in doubt and generalized suspicion a sign of intelligence rather than a weakness in discernment.

Once again, when it comes to knowing whether or not Barack Obama was teleported to Mars when he was 19 years old by an American secret agency which wanted to colonize the red planet, as affirmed by Andrew D. Basiago and William Stillings, two self-styled “chrononauts”, we cannot help being amused. Although we may ask whether it was necessary to provide a refutation, if ironical, to this hypothesis, as the White House did in January 2012. It is undoubtedly more disquieting when this suspicion focuses on medical competence and, for example, leads vaccination coverage for such diseases as hepatitis B or measles to fall, thus resulting in deaths whose victims will ignore being casualties of this generalized suspicion. The case of the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine is exemplary and appalling.

At the end of the 90s, *The Lancet*, an English medical journal, was as thoughtless as to publish a study claiming to show links between this vaccine and the occurrence of certain pathologies, especially autism [KRI 10]. Later developments showed how this article, based on only 12 cases, was untrustworthy, and its conclusions were contradicted several times by expansive studies that attempted in vain to replicate the results that had been presented. *The Lancet* and several authors of that article recanted, the editor-in-chief of the medical journal even declared to *The Guardian*: “It is perfectly clear and unmistakable that the declarations made in this study are completely false. I feel deceived”.

The whole incident led to a condemnation of the British Medical Council, but it would be a mere anecdotal episode at most, were it not that it engendered a significant drop in vaccine coverage and a resurgence in cases of measles in several countries. Nowadays, years after that incident, rumors are still being circulated and parents are reluctant to expose their children to what they consider “a vaccine-related risk”. We could say the same about the

vaccine for hepatitis B, which still carries with it the rumor that it may favour the development of multiple sclerosis, and stirs up a certain reluctance in people which is not endorsed by the medical community. This is another case where we can expect, in future generations, numerous patients to consider themselves destined to be victims, unaware they were instead victims of their parents' thoughtless suspicion.

This suspiciousness, whether explicit or implicit, has always existed – it is the prerogative of power, be it economic, political, or symbolic to provoke these kinds of feelings – and has gone hand-in-hand with democracy from its origins and throughout its history [ROS 06].

However, as we have seen, this doubtfulness has reinvented itself as for its themes and the objects it projects itself onto, and above all it has propagated well beyond the lands of radicalism which, until recently, were the only significant spaces where it could find fertile ground.

It is difficult to come to grips with a phenomenon as substantial as that by citing people's stupidity or their dishonesty, as often happens when one is faced with beliefs he or she finds disconcerting. What then? I will take the opposite direction and I will start from the hypothesis that the situation is quite the reverse, since people have *reasons* to believe what they believe¹² and it is thanks to arguments particularly sound at first sight that this current doubt is gaining ground. To have *reasons* to believe does not mean that someone is *right* to believe, but that what leads us to agree, in addition to our desires and emotions, is coherence, argumentative power, and the coincidental fact that people want us to consider misleading propositions, claiming to shed light on the world, as facts. What is revealed by these propositions is the *dark side of our rationality*.

In this book, we will see that it is the new conditions of the information market and the incursion of doubt and falsehood into our public space which favor the expression of this dark side of our rationality. No one is especially responsible for this situation, not journalists, not scientists, not politicians, not Internet users, not even the conspiracy theorists themselves! It is a matter of shared responsibilities. To shed light on the situation we find ourselves in, I will show that it derives from a double process of “deregulation”: the

12 I draw inspiration from Raymond Boudon's position about this point [BOU 95] and more recently (2012), who herself draws from German sociologist Max Weber.

liberalization of the information market (the media, whatever their relationships, can start competing) and the offer revolution on this same market (anyone can propose a “product” on the information market). This twofold process reflects the two main values of our societies: freedom and equality, and it is thus awkward for me, being a democrat, to conceive it as inherently bad. On the other hand, everyone is allowed to show that it produces certain perverse effects so formidable that I am not afraid to write that it is defining the outline of a historic, if deeply unsettling, moment for our democracies. It is throwing a spanner in the redoubtable works that lead certain inaccurate ways of thinking to be made public, whereas they formerly remained private. This dark side of rationality is going to take hold of the democratic mind. Maybe it is not too late. It is as a lover of democracy that I have written this book, thus it really mattered to me, after a possibly frightening diagnosis, to take action and offer some solutions, not exclusively radical, to the problem.