Review article

Through the looking glass?

Debs Grayson

Derek Beres, Matthew Remski and Julian Walker, *Conspirituality: How New Age Conspiracy Theories Became a Health Threat*, Penguin Random House 2023

Naomi Klein, *Doppelgänger: a Trip into the Mirror World,* Allen Lane 2023

Misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories have become hot topics in recent years, spawning myriad books, podcasts and documentaries. Whatever impact this cottage industry of commentary is having, it certainly isn't reducing the power and popularity of the alt-information ecology. On the contrary, conspiracy theorists are becoming increasingly active outside of insular in-groups and internet shit-posting - in the UK most notably organising around opposition to pandemic lockdowns, low traffic neighbourhoods and 15-minute cities.

These mobilisations are often bewildering for those of us on the left, combining recognisable critiques of capitalist institutions - such as the pharmaceutical industry or the World Economic Forum - with climate denial and a general hostility to public health measures. While these trends are showing up around the world, UK conspiracy networks have particularly close links to those in the US, often sharing key gurus, media figures and funders. In this context, *Conspirituality* and *Doppelgänger* - two books which are primarily focused on the conspiracists' landscapes in the US - have many lessons for those of us on this side of the Atlantic.

Beres, Remski and Walker define conspirituality as the confluence of New

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Age ideas of holism, divine purpose and personal development with the paranoid visions of conspiracists, in which secret forces govern the world and nothing can be trusted. Both conspiracists and New Agers seek patterns and hidden truths, and they have become increasingly grafted together, especially through anti-vaccination movements and yoga and wellness networks.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, these relatively marginal conspiritualist narratives suddenly found much larger audiences, especially in highly neoliberal countries such as the US and UK. Measures such as masking, distancing and mass vaccination became interpreted by some as evidence of an overreaching state, bent on achieving some secret other aim such as mass surveillance, bio-hacking or acclimatising populations for climate lockdowns. And these narratives spread extremely rapidly within communities which were already used to questioning 'established truths' within biomedicine, and who were invested in alternative therapies such as homeopathy, Reiki and crystal healing. To the book's authors - all graduates of yoga cults and New Age wellness communities - the sudden explosion of conspiracy theory and QAnon-adjacent thinking among their friends and networks at this time was deeply concerning, but not entirely surprising. They began their popular *Conspirituality* podcast in May 2020, and have now produced hundreds of hours of content; their book provides a relatively succinct summary of the principal themes emerging from this project.

Part 1 outlines the contours of conspirituality as a phenomenon, highlighting how common New Age concepts such as karma, illusion and interdependence can resonate with the structures of conspiratorial thinking: 'Nothing happens by accident. Nothing is as it seems. Everything is connected' (p27, referencing Michael Burkun). Part 2 traces the fascistic historical roots of yoga and wellness in their contemporary Westernised forms, to show why the ableist and eugenicist structures of thinking embedded within them tends to lean far-right when they manifest as a political project. Part 4 recounts podcast listener stories of personal encounters with conspirituality, and the devastating effects it can have on health and relationships.

Part 3, a 'gallery of rogues', profiles some of the key figures within North American conspirituality. The political urgency of grasping the phenomenon was illustrated as the book was going to press, as two of those profiled - Robert F. Kennedy and Marianne Williamson - announced they were running for the US

presidency, and a third, Charles Eisenstein, became a leading Kennedy adviser. Their presidential campaigns provided a huge platform for mainstreaming their ideas, as well as insulation from measures to combat disinformation, as their statements on the campaign trail were protected as 'political speech'. And Kennedy is not the only conspiritualist to have since been offered a role in the incoming Trump administration.

The tone of the book, like the podcast, can sometimes be smug and overwritten (e.g. describing charlatan doctor Zach Bush as 'a pseudo-science thirst trap, with a side order of Jesus' (p222). Nonetheless, their work offers a hugely helpful framework, especially for those who have only caught the edges of these trends. The overall message is not reassuring; they show that, far from being a passing fad, conspirituality is now a significant political phenomenon and is likely to play an increasing role in formal politics.

As a regular listener of the podcast, much of the content was familiar to me, and it was hard to gauge what would be most impactful to an audience less familiar with its themes. To my mind, the most powerful new argument presented in the book is the idea that yoga workers as a group tended to be vulnerable to certain forms of conspiratorial thinking in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic due to their economic position as workers. Alongside being culturally primed to devalue public health messages, yoga teachers also occupied a particularly precarious position as self-employed workers in a saturated market - which in some ways resembles a multilevel marketing scheme.[1]

This was a group that found themselves largely without state support when lockdowns and distancing orders shut the studios, preventing them both from earning money and from engaging in what they view as essential spiritual practices. In the confusion and fear of the early months of the pandemic, a number of developments led some to a belief that the problem was in fact one of state overreach, or the bodily weaknesses of others; and that meant that mask mandates were unnecessary, and collective movement and breathing could be reclaimed as a prerequisite for health, rather than a threat to it.

What is significant in this analysis is its tracing of the shifting sands between individualism and collectivity within contemporary far-right thinking: while narratives of self-realisation and achieving the 'perfect yoga body' do dominate, it is inaccurate to describe this project as solely one of 'individualism'. What they

were refusing was, precisely, the advice to stay home and apart from one another. However, the togetherness they were longing for was different in character from the vision of collectivity within public health discourses.

Arguably, the collective of public health recognises different needs and vulnerabilities, and advocates for shared responsibilities for these differentiated needs; and in this sense it has a more individualised notion of the group. The collective of the conspiracy-minded yoga teacher, on the other hand, is homogenous, each body striving, through the same moves and prescriptive postures, towards the same ideal. And so it became ground zero for the spread of a particular kind of 'neoliberal fascism'. Instead of conformity being induced by the state, the collective is united by a dream of wellness promoted and enforced by fragmented and privatised commercial networks of ashrams, supplement sellers, alternative healers and miracle workers - which leave questions of equity and social justice at the door.

Many of the same characters and themes appear in *Doppelgänger*, though, as anyone familiar with her previous work would expect, Klein takes the argument in a more explicitly activist direction. Her starting point is the long-standing confusion between herself and the writer Naomi Wolf. Wolf has become increasingly conspiratorial in the past decade, and received a huge megaphone for her views during the pandemic, when she became a regular guest on Steve Bannon's podcast. As social lives and political activism moved almost entirely online, Klein watched as the 'other Naomi' spouted arguments about the pandemic being used as a cover for major societal and economic change, which sounded remarkably like her own thesis in *The Shock Doctrine* - but with Trumpian nationalism and violent insurrection being presented as solutions. Worse still, thousands of people online believed that this was Klein herself talking.

It's a brilliant premise for a book, and it is to Klein's credit that she does much more with it than just exploring the fascinating topsy-turvyness of her personal experience. Instead, she takes the concept of the doppelgänger and the mirrored self to weave together political, literary and personal themes, and to reflect on the possibilities for campaigning and organising (most specifically by the North American left) in current conditions.

One of the most effective chapters focuses on autism. Here, she shifts between her own experiences as the parent of an autistic child, the anti-vax networks

created around the MMR vaccine, the myths of Faerie children used to understand disabilities in mediaeval times, and the work of Hans Asperger in left-wing Red Vienna and later under the Nazi regime.

For the Nazis, autistic children were a threat to their ideals because they lacked *Gemüt* ('a person's sense of group bonding in the wider Volk' (p211)), and were unable or unwilling to conform to the collective. In essence, autistic children were devalued because they lacked fascism. Klein invokes Nazi ideology not to create distance from us, but to show the continuities between the normalised ableism of the worlds most of us inhabit and the explicitly fascist society that can lurk just around the corner. Parents of autistic children who believe that their child's condition is a preventable mistake from a vaccine - rather than an inherent part of who they are - of course do not wish their children to be sent to death camps. Yet the dream of the 'normal child' that should have been shares an underlying logic of perfectibility and achievement with the systems of classification developed by Asperger to determine which children contained 'enough fascism' to be of use to the Nazi state, and which were deemed 'useless eaters'. And it is this shared value system that was awakened on a mass scale when Covid-19 appeared, as the anti-vax networks developed around MMR became prominent conduits for a new era of eugenicist thinking.

Throughout her book, Klein uses the image of the mirror to explore a wide range of pairings and fracturings. In the chapter on autism, these include the autistic child as the mirror of the 'normal' child, the child as the mirror of the parent, and the kindly Asperger of the 1920s as the mirror of his Nazi doppelgänger in later years. In another powerful chapter, on Israel-Palestine, she works through the many kinds of doubling it involves - between Christians and Jews in the mediaeval period, between the 'old Jews' of Europe and the 'new Jews' founding the Israeli state, and between Israeli settlers and their North American counterparts. Importantly, she also highlights that Israel is a mirror of every wealthy capitalist nation state (including the UK) which relies on the dispossession and expulsion of countless others to continue with 'business as usual'. What makes Israel exceptional, then, is not that it is premised on a unique level of violence, but the fact that that its violence is so visible and acknowledged, and directly targeted at immediate neighbours, rather than being carried out at a distance, and in ways that obscure the lines of responsibility.

Speaking in terms of mirrors allows Klein to do important work - and yet, like all metaphors, it has its limits. However much Klein multiplies and refracts the different forms of mirroring, it remains a fundamentally binary image. And, at times, this impedes the search for possible ways forward: it flattens the serious differences that exist between those of us on 'this side' of the mirror, as well as limiting some of the possible routes to building solidarities with those through the looking glass.

For example, here is Klein describing the differences between conspiracy and investigative journalism:

> Responsible investigators follow a set of shared standards: double and triple source, verify leaked documents, cite peer-reviewed studies … It's a slow, expensive, careful process, but it gets as close as we know how to something we all used to agree was proof that something was true. Conspiracy influencers perform what I've come to think of as a doppelgänger of investigative journalism, imitating many of its stylistic conventions while hopping over its accuracy guardrails (p224).

To my mind, this significantly overstates the level of consensus that has at any point existed about the capacity of journalism which follows these 'shared standards' to produce 'proof that something was true'. [2] And it implies that the solution is to rebuild trust in 'responsible journalism' - finding ways to pull people who have entered the mirror world back to 'our side', to the singular worldview apparently shared by those who do not subscribe to conspiracy theories.

At points she does try to complicate this binary.[3] But it continually re-emerges, as in statements such as: 'On either side of the reflective glass, we are not having disagreements about differing interpretations of reality. We are having disagreements about who is in reality and who is in a simulation' (p111) This presumes a level of shared epistemology and ontology on 'this side' of the mirror that underplays fundamental disagreements between liberal, left and more radical worldviews.

The authors of *Conspirituality* share this problem - something that is less evident in the book as it largely avoids prescribing solutions, but is very obvious in the podcast series. In episode 157, *Science and Sensibility*, the hosts recommend

some procedures for establishing the truth of a claim or statement, which amount to a set of conventional scientific literacy techniques, such as looking at journal rankings and reading conflicts of interest statements. Though they frequently invite guests who have comprehensive structural critiques of Western scientific systems and Euro-American thought, the views they express are never treated as fundamental challenges to the hosts' broadly liberal worldviews and epistemologies.

Their media literacy recommendations in this episode of the podcast are even more basic: they suggest that a trustworthy source is one which is 'overall reputable', and state that 'there is a categorical difference between reputable media and media that is obviously a source of propaganda and conspiracy theories'. As with Klein, this implies that the solution to conspiracism is a return to conventional journalistic practices and rebuilding trust in established institutional media. Yet the problem we face is precisely that there is no categorical difference between reputable media and propaganda. This is not because conspiracism isn't stylistically recognisable: it is because mainstream liberal thinking is so utterly out of tune with reality.

Discussions on the media take up relatively little space in both books, but they stood out to me because so much of my recent work has been in the field of media reform and transformation. This work has included running a campaign for the Media Reform Coalition on the future of the BBC;[4] working with the People's Newsroom Initiative on how journalism can support a transition towards a regenerative economy;[5] and presenting Dis/Mis, a recently launched podcast on dis- and misinformation with the independent press regulator IMPRESS.[6] In all of these strands of work, it is abundantly clear that traditional journalism and media institutions are structurally incapable of making sense of the conjuncture we find ourselves in.

This incapacity is partly caused by business models and algorithms seeking to make money from sensationalist and provocative content, but it is also pervasive across the wider media landscape: it is baked into the forms of news bulletins, the professions of 'journalists' and 'editors', and the artificial separation of news desks and beats. When the BBC accurately reports on global temperature rises or the latest IPCC warnings about the climate catastrophe, but then immediately moves on to discussing the latest government budget - as if 'tax cuts' or 'jobs' are

unrelated to the previous segment on 'the environment', and that we can continue with business as usual - it is actively misinforming people about the scale and implications of climate breakdown.

It is hardly surprising that many people who recognise such misinformation conclude that the institution does not really believe the things it is saying about climate change. And, in the absence of a clear systemic analysis of why it is that liberal institutions cannot speak truthfully about the state of crisis we are in, it is equally unsurprising that some will turn to conspiracies about the green deep state, or climate change being concocted by the global south as cover for appropriating 'our' wealth. This is not a problem that can be addressed on the level of more 'accuracy guardrails'; and it is certainly not addressed by treating people's lack of trust in 'reputable media' as the source of the problem, rather than a predictable outcome of media so often acting in a fundamentally untrustworthy manner.

Klein is a more radical thinker than the podcasters, and elsewhere in *Doppelgänger* does stress the connections between the failings of liberal institutions and the spread of conspiracism. But nevertheless the image of the mirror at times collapses the complex array of positions which exist into two opposing camps. Yes, of course there are the Steve Bannons on the 'other side' of the mirror, who are clearly the enemies of anyone fighting for collective liberation. But there are plenty of people whom Klein would characterise as on 'this' side of the mirror who are manifestly in denial about climate collapse, or the extent of racial inequities, or the violence on which capitalist liberal democracies are premised - and who are also hindering the struggle towards a liveable future.

It does not seem to me that such people on 'our side' will be any easier to bring into our movements than some of those who have fallen through the looking glass; or, to put it more positively, there may be more opportunities for building solidarity with those who subscribe to some aspects of conspirituality but who are not ideologically committed to fascism, than with those who are holding on for dear life to liberalism. At least the former group recognise that there is something fundamentally wrong.

A recent episode I recorded for Dis/Mis was an interview with Lucinda Guy and Alice Armstrong from SoundArt radio, a community radio station based at the Dartington estate near Totnes.[7] Totnes is a conspirituality hotspot in the UK, and

we had a fascinating conversation about how they approach climate denial and health misinformation within their own station rules and the regulatory framework of Ofcom. They described a combination of relatively simple guidelines for what can be broadcast - such as 'we want your experiences rather than your opinions', or 'discuss any kind of healing but don't discourage anyone from going to their GP' - alongside a more subtle relational approach, which allows for different views to be explored while still acknowledging that some people have more accurate knowledge and expertise than others.

Community media spaces like SoundArt bear no resemblance to the shiny techno-solutions of algorithms and AI that many in the disinformation space tend to focus on; and they may not be seen as conforming to what the *Conspirituality* authors characterise as 'reputable media'. But they do provide a very different experience of media, as something that can be communal, cocreated and empowering; and I believe this has a much better chance of challenging the paranoia that conspirituality thrives off than patronising investigations by 'reputable' institutions like the BBC, regardless of their 'accuracy'.[8] And they may be among the forums that allow some of the non-fascists from the 'other side' of the mirror to recognise common cause with anti-capitalists and environmentalists on 'our side', who also understand that powerful forces are stacked against us, and that our ecologies, livelihoods and struggles are all connected.

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Notes

1. They note that teaching others to become yoga teachers has long been more lucrative than yoga teaching itself, leading to a glut of teacher training and train-the-trainer courses, with all the self-referential and secular logics of a pyramid-style scheme - pay me $3000 to teach you to get other people to pay you $3000 for this training etc.

2. Fields such as peace journalism, for example, have long critiqued conventional journalistic practices, stating that within conflict zones the outcome is tantamount to 'war journalism'. They argue that, rather than situating themselves outside of the action and pursuing journalistic 'objectivity', reporters and media workers should

seek to de-escalate violence and recognise their active role in making peace more or less possible. See Robert Hackett, 'Is Peace Journalism Possible? Three Frameworks for Assessing Structure and Agency in News Media': https://regener-online.de/journalcco/2006_2/pdf/hackett.pdf.

3. For example in statements such as 'What am I still refusing to see about me and mine? About the people I think of when I say "us" and "we"?', p189.

4. https://www.mediareform.org.uk/about/bbc-and-beyond-campaign.

5. https://amam.cymru/the-peoples-newsroom/sharing-our-story.

6. https://rephonic.com/podcasts/dismis-exploring-misinformation-in-modern-media.

7. https://open.spotify.com/episode/1J42Kqu0d1AHfa6lzl3RrI?si=3yEh3cxDRhKeoPmqTv5bWg.

8. For example, the BBC Sounds documentary *Marianna in Conspiracyland* looks at the growth of conspirituality in Totnes. As usual with BBC content of this kind, while the interviews were interesting, the overall analysis was undermined by an inability to take seriously the idea that people might have negative views towards BBC journalists for any reason other than their own poor knowledge or understanding of the institution.