

In the latest issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, [David Runciman reviews 'Rethinking the Open Society: New Adversaries and New Opportunities'](#) (paywall). The book is a collection of essays, edited by Michael Ignatieff and Stefan Roch, that grew out of a lecture series at Central European University looking at the idea of the open society in response to recent political developments and ongoing issues.

Runciman opens his review with some interesting remarks about the origins of the phrase "conspiracy theory". Conspiracies are ancient, but the word 'theory' is a relatively new addition. It was coined by Karl Popper in the second edition of *The Open Society & Its Enemies* (1952), and is now in such widespread use that, notes Runciman, not a single one of the chapters in this book notes the link between the origins of these two ideas (the open society, and conspiracy theories) - despite the clear contemporary relevance of each to the other.



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RETHINKING OPEN SOCIETY

NEW ADVERSARIES AND
NEW OPPORTUNITIES

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There's a link also between the expression "conspiracy theory" and Popper's philosophy of science. Popper famously argued that what the scientist does, or should aim to do, is falsify. Hypotheses that are falsified can be let go, those that resist falsification become accepted, and in this way does scientific knowledge progress. Regarding society Popper argued in favour of openness because, he believed, openness is the best way for political ideas - 'theories' - to be similarly exposed. It is, in Popper's view, only in open societies that ideas and policies can be freely debated such that, as in a scientific lab, only the worthwhile survive.

Yet within the philosophy of science it has long been noted that while Popper's insights are

important, they are also clearly insufficient as a description of how science works. Many people, philosophers and scientists both, have observed that very little science is strictly falsificationist. In particular, when hypotheses appear to be falsified advocates tend not to reject them, but instead to explore further arguments and ad hoc additional theories that might accommodate the discrepancy. And indeed sometimes they are right to do so. (Mathematics is, incidentally, an unusual exception to these trends: here good counter-arguments are more readily accepted. [Christophe Heintz blogged about this on these very pages some years ago.](#))

Runciman observes in his review that today's enemies of the open society "have become more adaptable... often pay[ing] lip service to the idea of openness". Also: "today's conspiracy theorists are... opportunistic... They fit their theories to a rapidly changing landscape... adapting to the circumstances as they arise." In other words: enemies of the open society are doing just what scientists do when their ideas are challenged! In neither case are good counter arguments straightforwardly accepted. Counter-counter-arguments are sought instead.

To be clear: I'm not suggesting that scientists have the sort of motivations that enemies of the open society seem to. What I'm pointing out is the similarity in epistemic practice. There are, clearly, many differences between the politician and the scientist, but one thing they share is that when ideas are challenged they do not often reason in a Socratic way, treating arguments simply and only on their merits. Instead, they reason in an argumentative way, searching for whatever counter arguments might best persuade their target audience. In the political case, just as in science, this can mean developing ad hoc additional theories to explain why they were right all along. The conspiracy is simply one type of additional theory, albeit an often potent one.

None of this should be too surprising: argumentation is, after all, how people reason in general (Mercier & Sperber, 2017). To counter these tendencies we need, in science and society both, institutions and practices that function to keep us on the epistemic straight and narrow. In ways that are imperfect but nevertheless in the right direction, this is what peer review and open research practices do for science; and what democratic accountability and a free press do for society.

References

Ignatieff, M., & Roch, S. (Eds.) (2018). *Rethinking the Open Society: New Adversaries and New Opportunities*. CEU Press.

Mercier, H., & Sperber, D. (2017). *The Enigma of Reason*. Harvard University Press.

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