

KEYNOTES

David Runciman: *A Climate of Conspiracy*

Climate change is an issue that appears especially prone to accusations and counter-accusations of conspiracy. Is this because we live in a particularly conspiracy-minded age, or is because climate change is a particularly conspiracy-friendly issue? It's a mixture of both: this talk will explore how current mistrust of politics and politicians intersects with the specific forms of suspicion generated by climate science, with toxic results.

Eric Oliver: *Enchanted America: Magic, Metaphor and Conspiracy Theories in US Public Opinion*

Large majorities of Americans believe in the supernatural and paranormal, accept conspiracy theories as true, and reject basic scientific notions of evolution, climate change, and health. Social scientists usually dismiss such “magical thinking” as aberrant, irrational, or unworthy of serious attention. But pre-Enlightenment (or “Magical”) thinking not only has a logical utility, it also has a large and independent impact on public opinion. Using a series of novel measures and experiments from four national surveys, we illustrate the psychological correlates of magical thinking and its influence on a wide array of political and social beliefs. We find that many factors commonly attributed to conspiracy theories, such as authoritarianism, moral foundations, and disgust sensitivity, actually result from differences in magical thinking rather than abstract ideological commitments. We conclude that magical thinking is a powerful and latent influence on Americans’ political beliefs and can explain many outstanding paradoxes in contemporary public opinion.

Harriet Washington: *Epidemics of Conspiracy*

My paper largely falls under the rubric “Epidemics of Conspiracy” but I also touch upon agency, intentionality, and complexity.

Much discussion focuses upon the reasons, consequences to the state, and possible “cures” for a disparate reading of medicine’s approach to modern epidemics by the distrustful, among whom the medically marginalized are disproportionately represented. Less attention is paid to the consistency with which labels such as “conspiracy theory” and “denialist” are applied. Even less attention is paid to how these designations shape and are shaped by the authority and perception of the majority which often fails to perceive or misinterprets the medical experiences, beliefs and cultures of marginalized or despised subgroups.

I propose to address these neglected questions through the prism of conspiracy theories and denialism as a prominent feature of public responses to minority responses to past and present epidemics including recent controversies over HIV-AIDS, vaccination and immunization programs, and the current Ebola crisis.

Of course some conspiracy theories, such as the Watergate burglary, are true, but many discussions gloss over this fact. The history of medicine canon in the US is heavily edited to exclude many of the events and policies that would buttress the theories of the medically marginalized and I will use examples of research with African Americans and Africans, some drawn from my book *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Experimentation from Colonial Times to the Present* to illustrate how such historical lacunae suppress acknowledgement of true conspiracy theories.

PANELS

Karen Douglas: *When “global warming is a hoax” is itself a “hoax”: How the psychology of ‘warmist’ conspiracy theories diverges from ‘denialist’ and general conspiracy belief (from work with Robbie Sutton)*

An emerging consensus in the psychological research literature on conspiracy theories is that belief in such theories is associated with (1) belief in other un-related conspiracy theories, (2) non-rational thinking, and (3) rejection of science. More controversially, some research also links conspiracy belief specifically to denial of climate change. However, climate change deniers do not have a monopoly on conspiracy belief. Some conspiracy theories link powerful industrial interests with efforts to cast doubt on climate change; some of these conspiracy theories have a recursive character in that they accuse covert alliances of fuelling conspiracy theories for nefarious purposes. Four studies show that the psychological underpinnings and ramifications of these “warmist” conspiracy theories (e.g., accusing the oil lobby) differ from “denialist” (e.g., accusing climate scientists) and general conspiracy theories (e.g., about 9/11, the death of Princess Diana), in several important respects. Specifically, “warmist” conspiracy theories are unrelated to “denialist” theories at zero order, are unrelated to non-rational thinking (e.g., magical ideation and non-analytical mindsets), and are negatively related to rejection of science generally and to denial of climate change specifically. These findings call for a rethink of the structure and rationality of conspiracy belief and its relation to rejection of science.

Lukas Engelmann: *Bacteriology as Conspiracy: Dr Kinyoun and the 1900 Plague in San Francisco*

When the Third Plague Pandemic was announced to have reached San Francisco in March 1900, its arrival spread controversy, the impact of the outbreak was dismissed and its very existence openly denied. Being it Chinese doctors, local business associations, various influential gangs, the Californian Governor, the City’s Board of Health or the federal Marine Hospital Service: all held their own belief of what plague actually was, if it actually had arrived in the US mainland and if drastic measurements such as quarantining the Chinese quarters were indeed necessary. And just after a few days, not the epidemic but the strange science of bacteriology seemed to be plaguing the “Paris of the Pacific” (Chase 2003).

Ridiculing bacteriological procedures through newspapers, a deep-seated mistrust in laboratory medicine published in various medical journals, the outspoken denial by concerned politicians and businessmen crafted a climate in which bacteriology became a highly suspicious activity. Science, scientific methods and the chief representative during the outbreak, the federal bacteriologist Dr. Joseph J. Kinyoun became itself not only marginalized, but openly suspected of conspiring against the city, of delivering false proof and of spreading the plague himself.

Retrospectively, Dr. Kinyoun became a heroic pioneer; hagiographers like to place him at the very origin of a modern US public health system, as he stood up to political opposition, legal prosecution and threats on his life to conquer both plague and public misconceptions. The paper will demonstrate that the condemnation of bacteriological knowledge, its demonization as a bearer of plague and its rejection as non-medical knowledge tells as much a story about political interests in the denial of plague, as it reflects the immature status of bacteriological practice at the time.

Bacteriology was a science in the making, a paradigm to be established and as such a heavily scrutinized practice whose usefulness needed to be achieved and demonstrated. As a weak paradigm, it provided the ideal target to deny the presence of plague. As a successful scientific method, it was supposed to give reason for drastic measures, costly quarantines and extensive campaigns. Bacteriology, the paper will show, was as dependent on the outbreak of plague to become a successful medical science, as bacteriology was needed to justify highly controversial methods of containment and to establish a modern public health service.

***Bradley Franks: Conspiratorial Mentality, Monologicality and Social Relations:
Exploring the Contents of Beliefs***

Recent research has developed a series of strong ideas about the nature and implications of belief in conspiracy theory. One is that belief in one conspiracy theory begets belief in others – they are a or “monological” form of thinking, in which different conspiracies are believed and employed in the same way, grounded in distrust of authority. Another is that conspiracy theories are essentially concerned with individual beliefs; whilst they may involve beliefs about the agency of specific social groups of conspirators, they tend not to lead to any sense of group identity amongst their believers – they depend on outgroups without forming a coherent ingroup. In some ways as a consequence of the first two, the third idea arises: conspiracist mentality leads to disengagement from civil society and the political process.

Drawing on data from interviews with believers in conspiracy theories, we suggest that these ideas should be debated by being placed in a more nuanced context of the details of what people believe and how they do so. A core finding is that conspiracy theorists view themselves as researchers or truth seekers, engaged in developing alternative explanations of social facts. Some have domain-specific conspiratorial thinking (applying it to specific events such as 9/11 or areas such as financial markets), whereas others are more domain-

general or monological (applying conspiracist explanations to multiple domains), though not all of the latter express a general distrust of authority. These differences relate to variations in epistemological commitment to the explanations and ontological assumptions about the kinds of agents and agency that exist. At one pole, conspiracy thinking appears quasi-religious in positing novel ontologies whose use in multiple explanations ameliorates anxiety; at the other pole, it uses everyday ontologies and abductive reasoning to infer the 'best' alternative explanation of a perplexing event; and between the two are shades of variation or 'bricolage' in the assembly of beliefs and explanations. Another core finding is that conspiracy thinking does not exist in a social vacuum: believers have nuanced views about the beliefs of those who do and do not subscribe to their alternative explanations. They form articulated representations of ingroups and outgroups, developing a social identity around their CT thinking, and often engage in social activities and networks that depend on those representations and memberships. These networks give rise to a variety of forms of social engagement, ranging from on-line discussions to in vivo group meetings. Nor do CTs exist in a personal vacuum: the attraction of CTs depends not just on their content but is also usually rooted in an individual's own 'projects' (e.g., explaining traumatic life events, developing self-awareness), heightened by major, perplexing societal events (e.g., 9/11 or 7/7). A final core finding is that conspiracy theory believers often engage in political action such as petitions and demonstrations and election voting.

In sum, assessing the detailed contents of beliefs in specific CTs allows us to unpack and debate some widely-held views about conspiracist mentality, and to demonstrate that it is more varied than often assumed.

Mathias Girel: *Conspiracies Intentional Indiscernibles*

In this paper, I am dealing with "Conspiracy Arguments", by distinction with Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracies in general. One can raise a "Conspiracy Argument" when one thinks that a particular situation might better be redescribed as resulting from a coordinated strategy by a plurality of actors, motivated by a certain interest, the knowledge of which is either secret or extremely distributed, and this of course does not involve a global picture of society, of Power or of "official truths". Such examples can be heavily substantiated, as evidenced by the recent historical work of Proctor in Golden Holocaust or Rosner and Markowitz in Deceit and Denial, and can be subjected to empirical descriptions as well as refutations.

In this context, I am suggesting that Conspiracy Arguments can be read as a sub-family of Indiscernibility Arguments (IA). IA are frequent in the history of scepticism: they were raised by Academic Sceptics against the Stoics (how can one tell a twin from a twin or an egg from an egg, if one is building an empiricist epistemology and if they are perceptually indiscernible?). They have also been frequent in philosophy of Action, when Wittgenstein asked how we could tell the difference between "I raise my arm" and "my arm goes up", leading to most of the philosophy of intention to address this challenge, and in Aesthetics, after Danto's inquiries on Warhol's Brillo boxes (is such a work of art discernible from an industrial artefact?).

In recent sanitary and environmental controversies, we have seen some actors mimicking the vocabulary of scientific inquiry (“There are several causes”, “we need more research”, “This might be a false positive”), and I am claiming here that the redescription of these statements as resulting from a strategy motivated by other ends than scientific ones involves a case of Indiscernibility arguments, where the indiscernibility is not perceptual or ontological, but mainly intentional.

David Hickman: *Polio Wars: Conspiracy and Democracy in Pakistan*

Poliomyelitis has been all but eradicated – from 350,000 cases worldwide in 1988 to just 314 in 2013. In 1988 the disease was transmitted in 125 countries; in 2014 there were only three: Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan. The World Health Organisation has estimated the benefit of complete eradication at \$40-50 billion over the next 20 years, mostly in developing countries.

But in Pakistan the rates of transmission have started to rise again – at a time when polio vaccination teams risk serious injury or death in certain parts of the country, notably in the northwest, Baluchistan and Karachi. Seventy vaccination workers have been murdered in the last four years. The attacks began in the aftermath of the killing by American special forces of Osama bin Laden in May 2011.

A year later, the Pakistani Taliban issued a fatwa declaring polio vaccines a ‘poison’ – part of a Western conspiracy to sterilise Muslims – and began killing vaccination workers. Shortly afterwards, it was reported that the location of bin Laden’s hideout was confirmed by a CIA-led operation in which a Pakistani medic went door-to-door conducting a fake vaccination programme.

Other conspiracy theories about the vaccine quickly began to circulate. The medicines contained pork, or the urine of George W Bush. As well as violence, the vaccination efforts now faced increasing resistance from families of children at high risk.

These polio conspiracy theories appear to have a clear source and a depressingly obvious consequence. The fatwa was issued by Taliban leader Gul Bahadur, and shortly afterwards attacks on polio vaccine workers escalated. However, the Pakistani Taliban has since reversed its fatwa, and religious party leaders have (unusually) collaborated in conveying public messages that the vaccine is safe. Yet widespread fear of vaccination, and the violence against anti-polio workers, persist. The genie has successfully resisted being returned to the lamp: conspiracy theories about vaccination programmes have proved strongly immune to rebuttal, even when that rebuttal comes from one of the very sources of those theories.

This paper follows the trajectory of polio conspiracy theory: the sources, propagation, and resistance to debunking in a febrile media ecology that is especially rich in conspiracy theories. It is also a case study in the power of a conspiracy theory to infect, maim and kill.

Mark Honigsbaum: *False alarms and uncertain risks: reflections on "the pandemic that never was"*

In May 2009, shortly before the emergence of H1N1 'swine flu' in Mexico, the World Health Organization changed its definition of a pandemic. Henceforth, it would no longer be necessary for an influenza virus to cause 'enormous numbers of deaths and illness' for the WHO to trigger an international health emergency. Instead, all that would be required was sustained 'human-to-human spread' in several WHO regions at the same time.

To the WHO's critics on the Council for Europe and elsewhere, that definition change was no accident but prima facie evidence of conspiracy to hype swine flu. For who stood to benefit from the lowering of the severity threshold but drug companies and vaccine manufacturers? As the Labour MEP Paul Flynn put it, H1N1 was 'the pandemic that never was', adding: 'It might not just be a conspiracy theory, it might be a very profitable conspiracy'.

This paper argues that such conspiracy claims are best understood as a reaction to securitisation discourses in which uncertainty about biological risks is increasingly invoked to justify strategic interventions in the name of public health. Biosecurity discourses, like national security discourses, seek to draw authority not only from known facts about the world but from that which is unpredictable and opaque to rational inquiry, or what Donald Rumsfeld famously called 'known unknowns'. These known unknowns are also central to biomedical research and scientific constructions of pandemic viruses as capricious and unpredictable ('the virus writes the rules,' declared Margaret Chan at the start of the 2009 pandemic, 'and the virus can change the rules at any time').

By contrast, conspiracy theories about biological risks draw on the same rationales to highlight the instrumentality of securitisation discourses and offer a competing explanation for their deployment – one in which the strategy is not greater biosecurity but the production of greater uncertainty and anxiety. In this sense, conspiracy theories can be seen as critiques of biopower and forms of what Foucault called 'subjugated knowledge'.

The appeal of such accounts is that, by exposing the hidden logic of biosecurity interventions and their true purpose, they offer certainty in place of uncertainty. By contrast, this paper argues, that to enter the world of biosecurity is to enter a world of insecurity – a place where false alarms, accidents, and infelicities are both ubiquitous and inevitable.

Tobias Kelly: *Conspiracies of Conscience: British Pacifists in the Second World War*

This paper examines suspicions about conscientious objectors in Second World War Britain. People claiming exemption from military service on the grounds of conscience faced widespread accusations that they were self-interested, cowards, or traitors. Perhaps unsurprisingly many conscientious objectors were keen to demonstrate their loyalty to the British state. This paper examines the arguments made by conscientious objectors, and the criticisms they faced when doing so. Claims of conscience raise particular questions about

the shifting problems of doubt, denial and dissent in the politics of knowledge. Put, simply how do we know what conscience looks and sounds like when we come across it? Who has the expertise to make judgments over conscience? And how do we distinguish conscience from treachery, cowardice and self-interest, if at all? The paper argues that the constant questioning of those who made claims of conscience highlights a form of citizenship that is compromised and anxious at its core. Critical scholarship has often looked to the margins in order to find the tensions within liberal democracies. However, liberal democracies can be deeply suspicious about those who claim to stand most strongly by its principles.

Peter Knight: *The Invisible Hand: Corporations, Collusion and Conspiracy in the Gilded Age*

What is the difference between an invisible hand and a hidden hand explanation? Conspiracy by definition would seem always to involve conscious, intentional planning by a tight-knit group of conspirators, but is it possible for conspiracy to emerge out of the everyday interaction of complex institutions, systems and processes, without there ever quite being the conscious, deliberate decision? What are we to make of the fact that the central axiom of both conspiracy theory and ecology is that everything is connected? This paper will consider the outer reaches of the definition of conspiracy theory by looking at the way that structure has been imagined as conspiracy in ecology and economics.

Stephan Lewandowsky: *The Quantum Mechanics of the Rejection of (Climate) Science: Achieving Coherence by Conspiracism*

Science strives for coherence. For example, the findings from climate science form a highly coherent body of knowledge that is supported by many independent lines of evidence: Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from human economic activities are causing the global climate to warm and unless GHG emissions are drastically reduced in the near future, the risks from climate change will continue to grow and major adverse consequences will become unavoidable. People who oppose this scientific body of knowledge because the implications of cutting GHG emissions—such as regulation or increased taxation—threatens their worldview cannot provide an alternative view that is coherent by the standards of conventional scientific thinking. Instead, I suggest that people who reject climate science (or any other body of well-established scientific knowledge) oppose whatever inconvenient finding they are confronting in isolation. Hence, claims that the globe “is cooling” can coexist with claims that the “observed warming is natural” and that the human influence does not matter because “warming is good for us.” Coherence between these mutually contradictory opinions—which are analogous to the different states of particles in quantum mechanics—can only be achieved at a highly abstract level, namely that “something must be wrong” with the scientific evidence. This high-level coherence accompanied by contradictory subordinate propositions is a known attribute of conspiracist ideation, and conspiracism is therefore almost necessarily implicated when people reject well-established scientific propositions. I present evidence for the involvement of conspiracism in the rejection of science and show how it can be modelled in a rational decision framework.

Christos Lynteris: *Suspicious Corpses: Body Dumping and Plague in Colonial Hong Kong (1894 – 1905)*

Between 1894 and 1926 bubonic plague raged on almost annual basis in Hong Kong, causing thousands of deaths, mainly amongst the Chinese population of the British colony. In the course of this long epidemic, British authorities took drastic and often draconian measures against the disease, whose pathogen was identified in 1894. These measures elicited the resistance of both the Chinese elites and the lay population of the colony. Although historians have extensively discussed these colonial dynamics as regards the initial outbreak of 1894, later outbreaks and their social impact have been largely ignored.

This paper examines a practice that resonates with recent events in Ebola-stricken West Africa: body dumping. Seen as a potential cause of infection (what contemporary epidemiology would call a "cultural vector") as well as a political problem of civil disobedience to public health policy, body dumping was systematically studied and problematised by the British, who believed that the practice stemmed from native suspicion towards intrusive anti-plague measures. The paper explores shifting ideas and policies surrounding colonial suspicion of corpse dumping as a supposedly fuelled by Chinese suspicion of the British anti-plague apparatus in Hong Kong. These, the paper will argue, were crucial in the colonial inter-constitution of the native body and city as sites of pestilence and disorder.

Stephen Mawdsley: *'Monkey Serums': Conspiracy theories and America's reaction to the Salk polio vaccine, 1954-1960*

For the first half of the twentieth century, epidemics of the viral disease, polio, sporadically swept across the United States, causing fear, paralysis, and occasionally death. After a massive clinical trial among 1.8 million children, a polio vaccine developed by Dr Jonas Salk at the University of Pittsburgh was licensed by the federal government in 1955. Although the vaccine was declared 'safe, effective, and potent,' the public response to this new preventative was affected by Cold War anxieties and conspiracy theories. Most historians of polio have examined the rivalry between Salk and Dr Albert Sabin and have only started to explore public reactions to the vaccine. By drawing on archival records, historical newspaper articles, and oral history interviews, this paper will explore how some detractors shaped public uncertainty about the vaccine's safety and efficacy.

Marianna Poberezhskaya: *Blogging about climate change in Russia: activism, scepticism and conspiracies.*

This paper explores the role of new media in climate change communication in Russia. By providing an open space for the expression of very diverse points of view, the internet creates a substitute media reality where both climate activists and climate sceptics can question the established discourse. The analysis of 377 blog entries published on the LiveJournal blogging platform has resulted in the identification of four discursive categories: 'conspiracies of climate change', 'climate change apocalypses', 'political games of climate

change' and 'online environmentalism'. Each category demonstrates how the same topic can be framed in very different ways, influenced by bloggers' personal views rather than the cause, which initiates a publication. The findings show that the blogs act as 'echo chambers' for both climate deniers and climate activists reinforcing their already strong beliefs. The analysis has also demonstrated some parallels with the traditional media coverage of climate change related topics in their minimal critique of Russian state policy on the climate.

Douglas Selva: *The HIV-as-US Bioweapon Conspiracy Theory: A Case Study of Success*

In the early 1980s, as AIDS suddenly broke out in the U.S. and quickly spread, conspiracy theories began to arise regarding its origins. This was especially the case among marginalized groups in society who were hit hardest by the epidemic – homosexuals, African-Americans and intravenous drug users. Gay and African-American newspapers began to carry commentaries and articles suggesting that the U.S. government had developed HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, as a biological weapon to eliminate unwanted persons.

This HIV-as-bioweapon conspiracy theory piqued the interest of the Soviet secret service, the KGB. It took the existing conspiracy theory, altered it slightly for its own purposes and began to spread it as part of an international disinformation campaign against the U.S. Assisting the KGB in its efforts was its “fraternal organ”: the East German Ministry of State Security (MfS or Stasi). Interestingly, a cycle of misinformation and disinformation arose between conspiracy theorists in the West and the Third World, on the one hand, and the KGB and Stasi, on the other. Independent conspiracy theorists began to cite KGB and Stasi disinformation, and the KGB and Stasi continued to cite new publications by the conspiracy theorists. Due to this synergy, not only did the KGB disinformation campaign prove successful in sullyng the international reputation of the U.S., the conspiracy theory itself gained momentum and has continued to spread until today.

My paper will provide a case study of not only how conspiracy theories originate and spread, but also why certain conspiracy theories succeed and remain popular even after many years. In the case of the HIV-as-bioweapon myth, there were certain innate characteristics that contributed to its success. It seemed to contain an element of truth after revelations in the 1970s of various abuses by the U.S. government; it played into widespread and ongoing public fears – e.g., regarding U.S. military policy, biotechnology and genetic engineering; for certain groups, it confirmed images of the “enemy” (i.e., the U.S. government and “big science”); it explained a phenomenon that mainstream science could not easily or quickly explain; and it could be readily built into or combined with other popular conspiracy theories.

There were also external factors that contributed to the success of the HIV-as-bioweapon conspiracy theory – most importantly, the willingness of various actors to spread it for their own ends. Some activists exploited the conspiracy theory for ostensibly defensive goals: to defend a community or a group against perceived outside attacks or threats; to rally others

against a real or perceived evil through demonization; or to provoke a sought-after reaction by a powerful actor to “disprove” the conspiracy theory – e.g., to prod the U.S. government to provide a cure for HIV/AIDS. The conspiracy theory could also be exploited easily by various actors to advance other goals – e.g., for political gain by various governments, political movements and ideologues, or for notoriety, fame, ratings or financial profit by various “scientists”, columnists, television personalities and entrepreneurs.

Surabhi Ranganathan: *Conspiratorial thinking and the Law of the Sea*

Deep seabed mining – the recovery of mineral wealth from the bottom of the oceans – was part of several major post-War 20th Century fantasies: technological mastery, plenitude of resources; and equity in international relations. It formed the subject of a major law-making exercise from 1967 to 1994, recalled for the peaking of both East/West and North/South oppositions in its course. These oppositions subsisted, and time, money and energy were expended on fashioning a legal regime, despite early warnings from experts that seabed mining was not technologically viable or economically efficient. The lack of impact of these warnings is usually explained on the basis that, as the ideological conflict took over, the empirical evidence was neglected especially by the third world. Exploring this proposition, I analyse the spread of conspiratorial thought amongst the third world (which was suspicious of the negative data) as the product of lived experience of economic and technological deception and lawfare in international relations. Moreover, reflecting, through this account, on the benefits of conspiratorial thinking, I further engage in some speculation of my own: asking what might we gain in viewing the third world as the subject of a much grander dupe, in which the idea of seabed mining was sold as a promising one in the first place.

Joseph Uscinski: *The Mediating Impact of Conspiracy Thinking on Climate Change Attitudes*

From work with Santiago Olivella

Despite the fact that climate scientists are in near total agreement that climate change is real, manmade, and harmful, about 40 percent of the US population rejects the scientific consensus. This scepticism of climate change has stymied attempts to address its effects with public policy. We argue that attitudes towards climate change follow elite cues so that Republicans accept information from their elites and Democrats accept information from their elites. Polarized elite cues have driven mass polarization. We contribute to this traditional understanding of opinion by integrating not only general conspiracy thinking, but also the direction of conspiratorial ire as mediators in the elite-mass linkage. We argue that a conspiratorial predisposition can either amplify or diminish the effect that elite cues have on partisans by leading them to either (1) increase their belief in cues coming from their party because their conspiratorial ire is pointed at competing elites who are arguing the opposite, or (2) discount cues from their party’s elites because their conspiratorial ire is directed at those copartisan elites, rather than at the opposing party. Conspiratorial thinking then, depending on which elites one believes are conspiring, has the potential to move some people toward extreme positions and others toward moderate positions.

Dora Vargha: The Russians love their children too?: Cold war Conspiracies and suspicions in polio prevention

Despite the raging Cold War, the 1950s saw East and West unite in the noble goal of polio prevention as epidemics became more frequent and severe across the globe. Cooperation reaching across the Iron Curtain culminated in the development of several polio vaccines and the efforts of Jonas Salk, Albert Sabin and Hilary Koprowski were celebrated on the pages of newspapers and at scientific meetings. However, this was also a time of scientific uncertainty – the specifics of this relatively new disease were intensely debated and the new vaccines, introduced with considerable speed left many open ended questions. As vaccines crossed political dividing lines and ideologies, suspicions and conspiracy theories emerged. Was the communist government behind the new outbreak in Hungary? Was there a sinister American plan to poison Soviet children with the Sabin vaccine? And did Soviet scientists lie when they deemed the same vaccine safe and efficient after all?

Suspicious of the other and its technology, scientific knowledge and practice reflected beliefs about one another's – and indeed, one's own – political system. Moreover, attempts to do away with the suspect science were often rooted in the same Cold War preconceptions as the initial accusations. By analysing some of the Cold War conspiracy theories in polio prevention, this paper asks how trust, which is key to epidemic management, is formed and contested in global vaccination projects.