

The Paranoid Mind and Transcendence

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The story I want to contest goes like this: Facebook and Twitter just made the old virus of paranoid consciousness airborne, and opened a path to its weaponization. While the disease is not new, its epidemiology is different this time; it spreads faster than we can stop it.

However, the real culprit is not social media, not the Russians, and not the recession. The problem is much deeper; it concerns the human mind and its experiences with transcendence. I will use Boris Groys' work to argue that this rising paranoia is an unintended consequence of secularization – first of art, and then of the entirety of public life. I will then use the work of Thomas Luckmann to argue that education may provide inoculation against paranoid thinking, but not by expanding critical thinking or other rationalist curricula. Education must learn how to organize and structure the common human experience of transcendence over the everyday world. Education must pivot toward formation and away from narrowly understood learning.

THE RISE OF THE PARANOID CONSCIOUSNESS

In an influential 1964 *Harper's* essay, historian Richard Hofstadter paints a broad historical picture of what he calls “the paranoid style” in American politics¹ that has been around for a long time. He cites the panic on the account of Bavarian Illuminati at the end of 18th century that produced books like *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies*. He visits the anti-Masons, the anti-Catholics (and

anti-Jesuits especially), the populists, the alarmists about Mormons, the White Citizens' Councils and the Black Muslims. Hofstadter names three main Right-wing beliefs contemporary to him: in conspiracy culminating with the New Deal, in Communist infiltration into the American government, and in the network of agents in mass media, education, religion, undermining the American will to resist. He notes that over the decades, suspicion of scheming bankers and industrialists gave way to suspicion of Communists. In the past, the paranoid mind was preoccupied with conspiracies of obscure foreign agents, but in the 20th century, it was suspecting presidents, Supreme Court justices, and Secretaries of State. He also observed the changes made possible by the mass media:

The villains of the modern right are much more vivid than those of their paranoid predecessors, much better known to the public; the literature of the paranoid style is by the same token richer and more circumstantial in personal description and personal invective.²

By 1964, the paranoid consciousness was already blossoming, fueled by the mass media. Not only is the paranoid mind not new; even its growth is not new either.

Today's conspiracy theories may be less grandiose; they are more fluid, shallower but broader. Hofstadter described the fringes of American politics, but now the paranoid consciousness has moved toward the very center of it, capturing the highest offices in the U.S., and in several important European countries. Instead of one big, coherent conspiracy, we deal with many small, vague, disjointed, yet still clearly related beliefs: that liberals are somehow out to weaken America, that Hillary Clinton has committed treason, that global warming is a Chinese hoax, that Obama is a Muslim born in Africa, that vaccinations bring autism, that the Orlando shooting was staged, that the Twin Towers were blown up

by the FBI, etc. We have no objective way of measuring either the depth or the breadth of paranoid thinking, but it is patently *not* in retreat. Why is that? We live in the most educated society ever, with universal secondary education and mass higher education. The populace has never been better educated, but it is no less paranoid.

What interests me in Hofstadter's theory is the relationship between the paranoid consciousness and education. His own hypothesis about the paranoiacs is that "They see only the consequences of power—and this through distorting lenses—and have no chance to observe its actual machinery."³ In other words, making politics more explicit, and allowing more groups access to politics would help. That is obviously wrong, for many of the contemporary paranoiacs are *in* the government, or very close to it. They do know how politics is made, because they help halo making it. While Hofstadter's descriptions are very telling, his diagnostics are flawed.

Hofstadter did not present a full theory of the phenomena he described, but he had a few hypotheses. One Freudian clue he presents is that the believers in conspiracies usually project their own suppressed desires to the imagined conspirators.

Anti-Catholicism has always been the pornography of the Puritan. Whereas the anti-Masons had envisaged drinking bouts and had entertained themselves with sado-masochistic fantasies about the actual enforcement of grisly Masonic oaths," the anti-Catholics invented an immense lore about libertine priests, the confessional as an opportunity for seduction, licentious convents and monasteries.⁴

Hofstadter explains the phenomenon of the paranoid mind as:

a mentality disposed to see the world in this way may be a persistent psychic phenomenon, more or less constantly affecting a modest minority of the population. But certain religious traditions, certain social structures and national inheritances, certain historical catastrophes or frustrations may be conducive to the release of such psychic energies, and to situations in which they can more readily be built into mass movements or political parties.⁵

His idea of the paranoid consciousness is that it is a mental phenomenon that can be amplified by social conditions, but not caused by them. In other words, his reasoning is the same as presented in the opening lines of this paper. The paranoid consciousness is old; it was just accentuated by the Great Recession of 2008-2016. More and better education, more transparent politics will beat down the problem again.

Hofstadter believes the paranoid mind for some reason “resists enlightenment,” and that, by implication, more enlightenment would help. However, that claim clearly contradicts his own observation:

The higher paranoid scholarship is nothing if not coherent—in fact, the paranoid mind is far more coherent than the real world. It is nothing if not scholarly in technique. McCarthy’s 96-page pamphlet, *McCarthyism*, contains no less than 313 footnote references, and Mr. Welch’s incredible assault on Eisenhower, *The Politician*, has one hundred pages of bibliography and notes. The entire right-wing movement of our time is a parade of experts, study groups, monographs, footnotes, and bibliographies.⁶

The paranoid mind grossly overestimates world’s coherence; it seeks coherence where it does not exist. It analyzes claims, employs critical thinking, seeks evidence, evaluates it according its own standards, and

makes its own conclusions based on that evidence. In other words, the paranoid mind is exactly what we want an educated person with critical thinking skills to be. If you have a reason to doubt this, check any of the major conspiracy sites and forums. You will find massive repositories of evidence, of irrefutable arguments and unassailable logic. If you go bottom up, from basic facts to conclusions, these piles of evidence and argument are weak. If you look from the top down, from conclusions to evidence – they look solid. To build these massive towers of paranoid knowledge, one needs educated authors and readers.

The solution to the surge of paranoia is not in more enlightenment, and not in better critical thinking curricula. Christina Hendricks describes critical thinking as a balance between commitment and suspicion.⁷ There is very little evidence that such a balance is actually attainable on any kind of scale; no more than educating people out of envy, jealousy, or selfishness is. We have to reclassify paranoid thinking into one of the more fundamental essential human flaws, out of the category of accidental, temporary flaws. Moreover, the paranoid mind *does* express a commitment to the principles of rational knowing, and it *does* engage in a community of other learners, as Hendricks suggests. It does weigh and evaluate evidence according to what it thinks is an objective way of making a judgement. And it does suspect claims and evidence of “mainstream” science and mainstream media. It is just not as good at this as we could have hoped. The human mind does not seem to withstand the temptation of paranoid consciousness if sufficiently swayed by emotion, and by political context. I, for example, missed the point when the story of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. elections crossed the line between legitimate journalism, and yet another version of conspiracy thinking.⁸ My focus was too much on the other side’s conspiratorial thinking, and the desire for the story to be true. In other words, I do not question the desirability of the critical thinking education; I just express doubts in its achievability.

There is some credence to the story of social media replacing mass media, and of the effects of the change on minds. The economics of traditional mass media was such that if a publisher or an editor was found to peddle fake news, she or he was likely to suffer negative reputational and ultimately economic consequences. The class of professional journalists stood between the masses and their own penchant for the paranoid thinking. The journalist's collective practices; their professional checks and balances made a difference more than an individual journalist's ability for critical thinking. A democratic government does not presume honesty, but employs checks and balances. The mass media journalism similarly functions through its institutions of fact checkers, editors, competitiveness, and professional ethics.

Now the economics of fake truth have changed dramatically. The non-existent or anonymous publisher and editor are suddenly free of the external economic constraints. Moreover, the anonymous authorship together with the ease of sharing created an opportunity for weaponization of the paranoid consciousness. While the extent of the phenomenon is not yet clear, we have seen the proof of principle, and it is only a matter of time before major governments and non-government entities will learn how to induce paranoia in wider and wider circles among both enemies and their own populations.

Another problem is the reliance on highly technical knowledge in many contemporary conspiracy theories. The accessible world becomes more and more saturated with science and technology. There is no way for the absolute majority of people to assess the veracity of scientific claims related to climate change, the link between vaccination and autism, or the evidence of hacking. Nobody except for a few experts has this kind of knowledge. We all have to believe one expert or another. The paranoid mind is strictly rational from the point of accepting the evidence

presented by an expert on faith; it is just not very good at distinguishing real experts from fake ones. Even those with time for a good effort are often unable to reach the right conclusions.

A *This American Life* episode describes Ben, an Alaskan man who was trying to fact check Breitbart News' claim that the latest immigration wave in Germany has added 400,000 new crimes.⁹ Ben drilled the sources all the way down, and indeed found the original report by the German Ministry of the Interior. However, not being fluent in German, he missed the fact that the figure also included the crime of illegally crossing the border, which refugees committed just by the very act of their coming to Germany. In fact, the real crime rate in Germany remained unchanged in 2015, and there was no crime surge Breitbart reported on. So, did we not do a good enough job teaching Ben how to be an independent and critical thinker? Or, do we perhaps have unrealistic expectations about the extent to which people can resist conspiracy theories?

How do we deal with the fundamental flaws of the human mind during the era of social media (post-mass media)? Consider the real possibility that more or better education does not mean less paranoid thinking.

A reasonable theory is that social media and the Great Recession together caused a temporary flare up in the paranoid thinking, and we just need to educate our populations, and wait for the economic recovery. However, I will try to show that the root cause of the recent flare in paranoid thinking may not be attributed to *recent* social changes. It is a cumulative result of a much older social trend.

THE LOSS OF METAPHYSICS

I will use Boris Groys' essay on self-design to shed light on the philosophical dimension of the paranoid consciousness. Groys begins with an observation of the political sphere's aesthetization. "Every pol-

itician, sports hero, terrorist, or movie star generates a large number of images because the media automatically covers their activities,”¹⁰ he writes. In turn, an artist who enters the public sphere acts exactly like a public figure, through media. Consequently, “the artist becomes the artwork.”¹¹ The artist is no longer a producer of images and becomes an image herself (Groys attributes the idea to Nietzsche). Consciously working on the image of oneself is “self-design,” and it is equally characteristic of both artists and other public figures. The problem of any design is that it is perceived not as revealing, but as conceiving, as substituting substance for appearance (this idea can be traced to Walter Benjamin). In other words, people know that all or most public life is staged and designed. The art has its sacred origins, and when it invaded politics, it brought desecularization with it.¹²

A direct consequence of self-design is the expansion of suspicion. The blurring of the lines between the authentic and the designed *has* to produce more suspicion. Therefore, the next logical step for any self-design artist or public figure is to produce the sincerity effect, to overcome the suspicion. While art has been working at it for a while, in the public life the anxiety about sincerity has become a relatively recent effort. “We are waiting for a moment of sincerity, a moment in which the designed surface cracks open to offer a view of its inside.”¹³

Then, Groys presents a paradoxical, and yet ultimately a very convincing argument: “We are able to see things as they truly are—only when the reality behind the façade shows itself to be dramatically worse than we had ever imagined.” The idea is, one may not believe any revelation if it disproves one’s initial suspicion. Only when things appear even worse than you thought, will you be inclined to believe your eyes. This is why it is so easy to believe that millions of undocumented immigrants voted, or that Trump is an actual Russian spy, with a code name, and a

fake beard. In the world of self-design, bad news looks more truthful than good news.

As an aside, Groys published his essay in 2009, and it seems to foresee the appearance of Donald Trump, the master of manufactured sincerity. It also explains why the worse Trump looks during his outbursts, the more his supporters value his sincerity. Groys writes: “the individuals who show themselves to be especially nasty ... receive the most recognition and fame.”¹⁴ In the world of total design, the sincere bad boy satisfies the perverse thirst for authenticity. His flaws only serve as further evidence of his sincerity.

The next step in Groys’ reasoning is best presented in the author’s voice:

Confronted with a world of total design, we can only accept a catastrophe, a state of emergency, a violent rupture in the designed surface, as sufficient reason to believe that we are allowed a view of the reality that lies beneath. And of course this reality too must show itself to be a catastrophic one, because we suspect something terrible to be going on behind the design—cynical manipulation, political propaganda, hidden intrigues, vested interests, crimes. Following the death of God, the conspiracy theory became the only surviving form of traditional metaphysics as a discourse about the hidden and the invisible. Where we once had nature and God, we now have design and conspiracy theory.¹⁵

Groys links the paranoid consciousness to the aestheticization of public life (self-design), which is, in turn, linked to the loss of metaphysics. Conspiracy theories become a new and dominant form of metaphysics, an explanatory paradigm rooted in suspicion. The psychic mechanisms

of the paranoid consciousness are captured well by Hofstadter: it is the projection of suppressed desires. However, the epistemological meaning of it is better understood by Groys.

This link is important for my argument. The difference between a benevolent God and an evil conspiracy, I suggest, is not as large as one may suspect; both are metaphysical entities, both transcend regular human perception and experience. Paranoia is a kind of transcendence, and the paranoid mind seeks transcendence. The propensity to overestimate the coherence of the world noted by Hofstadter is deeply ingrained in all our minds. It is probably an evolutionary adaptation: cognition is mostly discerning patterns. Ignoring patterns is costlier than “seeing” patterns where they do not exist. It would also be productive, I believe, to examine the connection between suppressed desires and transcendence. Perhaps psychic roots of the paranoid mind are as deep as cognitive ones, but that would take another paper. Regardless of the cause, humans tend to seek and find an explanation that makes random and chaotic events look like parts of a larger design. Humans are predisposed to look for hidden order where there is none, and they find the malevolent order as easily as the benevolent one.

The whole idea of God, of the divine plan, is an ancient attempt to appropriate the paranoid tendencies of our thinking for the greater good. God is conceived as a benevolent conspirator, as someone who has a plan for us. The plan may never be directly known to us, or it may be sometimes thwarted by the devil, but it does exist, and if you look for evidence, you will find it. God is a version of (mostly) benign paranoia, it is the idea of something meaningful beyond the seemingly chaotic and senseless world. In the Abrahamic tradition, the world is presented as the arena for the struggle between two conspiracies, one by God and one by Satan. The bad conspiracies in the past had been balanced by good ones,

giving people hope and aspirations. This is no longer the case. Modern societies have managed to remove God and other god-like entities from public spaces, but did not manage to remove Satan. Therefore, the rise of the paranoid consciousness is best attributed to the unintended consequences of secularization of public life.

One may challenge my argument by pointing out that many people affected by conspiratorial thinking are also devoutly religious. However, secularization affected not people's minds, but the public discourse. One can be deeply religious, and see all kinds of signs of divine influence in one's private life. However, as Groys described, public life does not present any signs of the transcendence, only the metaphysics of conspiracy, hidden by design. It has no pointers at the orderly structure beyond itself.

The only long-term solution for the rise of the paranoid consciousness lies in developing a good conspiracy theory, in reinventing the metaphysics, in inoculating our minds with transcendence.

THE HIDDEN RELIGION

Thomas Luckmann, a sociologist of religion, argued that religion is not really disappearing from the modern world.¹⁶ He defines religion as experience with transcendence. He also discerns three levels of transcendence: "little," "intermediate," and "great." The first one includes anything beyond immediate direct experience, the second refers to transcendence accessible through other people's experiences, and the third is:

when an experience presents itself as pointing to something that not only cannot be experienced directly (as long as the experiencing self remains in everyday life) but in addition is definitively not part of the reality in which things can be seen, touched, handled by ordinary people.¹⁷

Luckmann believes that while the great transcendences happen

all the time, their organization and control is something all societies must learn how to do. He implies danger of raw, unprocessed great transcendences, and in my view, the spread of paranoia is one of the negative consequences of untamed quest for transcendence.

How people experience and interpret transcendence on its different levels, however, and what the concrete social constructs of religion are, is neither a matter of some putative “natural” religiosity of the individual human being nor of some “archetypal” religion of mankind. It is a matter of historical communicative processes in which experiences of transcendence are articulated intersubjectively and thus become memorable. By recounting, they become parts of collective memories. By systematization and institutionalization, they become quasi-objective social realities.¹⁸

Luckman describes the secularization as fragmentation of the religious world, as a loss of monopoly by organized religion. He links the process with a shift from multifunctional institutions to specialized ones. The unintended consequence of the development is that “isolated institutional ‘ideologies’ were incapable of providing a general subjectively meaningful system of social reconstructions of experiences of transcendence.”¹⁹ His basic observation is that the domain of the “great” transcendence is shrinking, but the “intermediate” and even “little” transcendences are actually growing. He cites self-realization, personal autonomy, and self-expression as dominant themes, as well as various forms of pseudo-science, magic, etc.

One can add mass culture phenomena to his list. Museums are shrines of relics, related to American history, culture, and future. The ideas of democracy and human rights, the various visions of technological progress, and space explorations can be and sometimes are the elements of transcendence. In American culture, there is a cult of the Civil Rights

Movement, with a pantheon of saints that include Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and César Chávez. Another quasi-religious tradition is headed by St. Stephen Jobs. It includes shrines of technology in form of Apple stores, and exquisitely wrapped relics of iPhones. Environmentalists present their own quasi-religious movement, and so do multiculturalists and the feminists. There would be nothing inherently wrong with this plurality, if not for the problem of the paranoid consciousness. My hypothesis is that our collective inability to institutionalize the “great” transcendences is the major contributor to the rise of the paranoid mind, which, in turn, presents a threat to democratic institutions.

Pat Robertson, like many other religious fundamentalists, intuitively senses but misdiagnoses the problem: “When there is no vision of God, the people run amok.”²⁰ He and people like him fail to understand that the solutions they offer are worse than the problem. None of the contemporary religions is capable of providing access to the great transcendence in the public sphere, because all of them evolved as exclusionary. They failed to adopt to the reality of complex multicultural and multiconfessional democratic societies. Luckmann’s prognosis for traditional confessions is not good:

It seems unlikely, however, that these reactions, which range from the Catholic Opus Dei to Protestant “moral majorities,” will prove successful in the long run. The fit between this kind of world view and the social structural determinants of modern life is poor.²¹

I can only add to it the very significant legal barriers to reintroduction of public religions that exist in the majority of societies. Even if it were culturally possible, it would have been completely unattainable from the legal standpoint.

EDUCATION AS TRANSCENDENCE

In the most practical terms, education is the institution that is most likely to introduce the institutionalized great transcendence. In Luckmann's terms, it is a task of creating "quasi-objective social realities."²² Such a sense is needed to establish metaphysics alternative to balance against the paranoid consciousness. We need to draw on the anthropological experiences of the major religions while rejecting their exclusionary heritage.

Education itself is already in many ways an intermediary transcendence phenomenon. After all, the project is about changing oneself, it is about transcending the old self, and becoming someone new. It is one nearly universal socialization mechanism, one last remaining rite of passage. Education is already close to a secular cult, in which personal becoming is expected as a transcendent experience. As a part of my job, I attend many public events for and about teachers and students. Every one of them without exception includes a story about how education changed someone's life. The stories speak about overcoming obstacles, giving inspiration, and ultimately, salvation. They have a powerful potential for sincerity, which is able to break through the self-design society. Despite Groys' assertions, not all sincerity is negative. For whatever reason, the stories of personal growth through education retain significant optimistic, positive potential.

The next logical step would be to figure out a way of moving from intermediate to great transcendences in education. I am not prepared to lay out a plan for how to do so right now. The general direction is to infuse the educational enterprise with something greater than personal transformation. The essence of the transformation is moving the formational side of education to the forefront, while relegating traditional learning side to the background. The great transcendences are in principle inaccessible to regular human experience. It can be a vision of the future, or the

notion of aspirational democracy.²³ However, we also need to construct a cult around it. It has to include its own sacred texts, visual representations, and rituals, all pointing at the experience of transcendence. I am arguing for the new age of education, a new quasi-religious institution dedicated to the project of remaking human beings. This may seem like a strange and overly ambitious project. However, it is no stranger and no bigger than the problem we are facing with the rise of the paranoid consciousness – a problem that threatens the very foundation of our democracy by depleting trust. It cannot be solved without repurposing of public education.

Resistance is futile; let us embrace the paranoia. We have met the enemy, and it is the human mind. The paranoid consciousness is simply the old human mind, unable to cope without a public and common way of dealing with the experiences of transcendence. We have forgotten how to produce good conspiracy theories, while remaining as open to bad conspiracy theories as ever.

1 Richard Hofstadter, “The paranoid style in American politics,” *Harper’s Magazine* 229.1374 (1964): 77-86.

2 Hofstadter, “The paranoid style in American politics,” 81.

3 *Ibid.*, 86.

4 *Ibid.*, 80.

5 *Ibid.*, 86

6 *Ibid.*

7 Christina Hendricks, “Trust and Suspicion in Critical Thinking as Transcendence,” *Philosophy of Education 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2006): 295-302.

8 See, for example, a good exposé by Zack Beauchamp, “Democrats are falling for fake news about Russia: Why liberal conspiracy theories are flourishing in the age of Trump” *Vox*, May 19, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/5/19/15561842/trump-russia-louise-mensch>

9 *This American Life*, “Fear and Loathing in Homer and Rockville,” originally aired 07.21.2017 <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/621/transcript>

- 10 Boris Groys, "Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility," *e-flux* 7, no. 6 (2009); <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/07/61386/self-design-and-aesthetic-responsibility/>
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Thomas Luckmann, "Shrinking Transcendence, Expanding Religion?," *Sociological Analysis* 51, no. 2 (1990): 127-138.
- 17 Ibid., 130.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid., 133.
- 20 Noor Al-Sibai, "Pat Robertson Blames Vegas Shooting on 'Disrespect' for Trump and the National Anthem," RawStory, 10/2/2017, <https://www.rawstory.com/2017/10/watch-pat-robertson-blames-vegas-shooting-on-disrespect-for-trump-and-the-national-anthem/>
- 21 Luckmann, "Shrinking Transcendence," 137.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, "Philosophy, Education, and the American Tradition of Aspirational Democracy," *Feminist Interpretations of John Dewey* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002): 95-112.