



South African Institute of Race Relations

The power of ideas

THE 2018 FNF/IRR LIBERTY LECTURE

BY GARETH VAN ONSELEN

1/8 NOVEMBER 2018

The great age of deceit

"In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true... Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow. The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness."

Hannah Arendt, 1951, 'The Origins of Totalitarianism'

Good evening,

Introduction

Let me start by thanking the FNF Foundation for Freedom and South African Institute of Race Relations for hosting tonight's lecture. This is the inaugural Liberty Lecture and I hope it becomes a valuable and important contribution to South African debate. Thank you, too, to you, the audience, for attending.

There is no shortage of lectures in the country today. Indeed, for a society that often suffers the consequences of a profound impulse towards anti-intellectualism and egalitarian sentiment, it is a remarkable fact that, almost without exception, every week there is a public lecture to be heard somewhere. But few of these are dedicated to liberal thought *per se* and rarely to the meaningful interrogation of an actual idea. For the most part they are political platforms, used to drive a current affairs agenda.

The Liberty Lecture, then, is a necessary addition and, hopefully, a chance to begin to develop and enhance a different and deeper kind of thinking. Let us hope it goes from strength to strength.

I wish tonight to talk about freedom and victimhood in general; and reason and political conspiracy theories in particular.

My argument is that one of the preeminent threats to reason today is the political conspiracy theory, now an omnipresent and defining part of South African debate – and yet one which has, to date, eluded any meaningful analysis. I will try to define the characteristics of a conspiracy and to illustrate how they augment and entrench an attitude of victimhood, which acts to destroy the ability of citizens to both demand and enforce political accountability. Likewise, the ability properly to value reason and evidence.

The age of enlightenment

But first, let us look at reason itself, and why it is important.

In his book, *Enlightenment Now*, Steven Pinker argues the enlightenment age is defined by reason, science and humanism. For Pinker, these three things engender and drive progress and it is on the back of them that societies and people advance and develop. In turn, upon which freedom rests; for the requisite counterparts, among them unreason, superstition and nationalism, are surely the source from which totalitarian thought draws its strength.

Of reason, Pinker says “there is no substitute”. Reason is not only the basis on which knowledge and understanding is built, but even the irrational relies on reason to exist. The moment you ask “why?” you have located yourself within the parameters of reasonable thought. Reason is, for Pinker, the “non-negotiable” basis of the enlightenment.

And he is right. Reason is our guide through the dark; its principles, the light towards which we walk. In a liberal society those ideals are well known: truth; free speech; justice; choice; accountability; competition; responsibility – these are the beacons by whose light we make our decisions. The closer we get to them, the brighter the world around us and the further behind we leave the dark.

Science, Pinker says, is the method by which we interrogate and test any given truth, for it is through conjecture and refutation that knowledge advances. Empiricism and the scientific method are thus the foundation on which reason rests. The stronger the foundation, the greater the role reason plays in a society.

Today, many of those values are taken for granted, and some liberal thinkers are among those who do not properly appreciate their import.

Reason, and truth in particular, are often treated with disdain. Angry at the radical left, many libertarians seem to have embraced the likes of Donald Trump, a pathological liar and amoral sociopath, in order that they might taunt their ideological enemies. They argue that economic prosperity is a substitute for moral conviction; if not, that because it is an ostensibly positive by-product of demagoguery and hate, this negates any concern about individual character or ethics.

And so they tolerate, ignore or even defend the deceit – and the sustained accompanying onslaught on truth and reason – simply to provoke or score a cheap point. In doing so, they implicitly endorse a fundamental assault on enlightenment values.

They do not appreciate what they have, or the blood that was spilt to birth the age of reason and truth we enjoy today. In turn, how brittle this epoch is, and how easily its intellectual and principled infrastructure is fractured and broken.

Humanism, Pinker argues, speaks to what we use reason and science in service of – broadly, what he calls “human flourishing.” While that might seem self-evident, a great deal stands in opposition to that idea: the good of the tribe, for example, or the nation, religious faith or some millenarian cultural or historical belief. All of these things elevate an essentialist trait, real or imagined, cultural, historical or genetic in nature, above reason and truth. Thus, above freedom.

Collectivism and group think are the source of irrationality and unreason. In South Africa, they are powerful forces indeed. We are a nation of tribes. When we are not, we feign one national tribe. But one way or the other, always there is some essentialist belief woven into the patchwork background we would make believe is our own special and singular tapestry.

We are held together, as so many nations are, more by faith and by myth, than by any shared sense of history or purpose. The past, a well from which we simultaneously draw hate and hope, neutralises both thought and action, certainly progress. We cannot look forward without looking back. And so, constantly, the past is wrenched from behind us and inserted into the present. But not in an attempt to get closer to the truth, rather some convenient and polished aspect of it, inevitably repurposed for an expedient and nationalistic contemporary end. We don’t learn from the past, so much as rewrite it. And we cannot escape it.

Our national mantra – the Rainbow Nation – has the past built into it. The American Dream, by way of comparison, speaks to a possible future. Inherent to it is the idea that anyone can be whatever they want to be – an aspiration or ideal, not the cure for a disease. There is no South African dream. Just a national memory, and its consequences.

In that vacuum, all the component parts of unreason run heavy in our veins – fear, distrust, superstition, ignorance and low self-esteem.

Such things flow from or encourage an attitude of victimhood, and stifle agency.

Fear, Frank Herbert says, is the mind killer. If that is so, then ignorance is the tranquilizer that suppresses original thought and dulls curiosity. It opens the door to fear. Low self-esteem creates doubt, not confidence, and slows action in turn, rather than encouraging conviction and purpose. Superstition feeds distrust and, from that, animosity grows.

Freedom provides space for both agency and victimhood, but it is augmented and strengthened by enlightenment values alone. And of all the liberal principles that underpin freedom, it is the idea of competition and choice, with it the risk and potential for failure, that constitutes ground zero. It is on this battleground that the forces of victimhood and agency wage their war.

No idea is more intrinsic to a properly functioning democracy than competition – an appropriate synonym for ‘multi-party democracy’ itself. On it, a myriad other fundamental democratic principles are built, not least, the marketplace of ideas. From it, a wealth of other values and consequences emanate.

Of these, four in particular are worth mentioning: conflict and excellence, on the one hand; loss and tolerance, on the other. The degree to which these ideas are accepted and advocated will determine whether competition is healthy or detrimental, and the manner in which they interrelate pre-eminent in defining the nature of the society it informs.

At the heart of competition lies conflict. For a society to grow and prosper it must constantly recalibrate itself and, to do that, the *status quo* should be relentlessly interrogated, its virtues identified and elaborated on, its disadvantages isolated and reduced.

Disagreement is inherent to such a process but the reward for overcoming it is excellence and progress, and they are to everyone's benefit. Properly embraced, competition fuels excellence by promoting best practice – through trial and error – punishing complacency and, in so doing, driving a society forward. In turn, a society that embraces competition is self-aware, questioning and defined by a set of ideals, the attainment of which it is constantly striving for.

There is a cost to conflict: the possibility of loss. In entering into any competition, one must be prepared to lose something and, in turn, to tolerate a possible outcome against which one stands. While it is true that competition needs rules, and that those rules must be fair and consistently applied, its parameters should never work to stifle competition itself. Rather, they should facilitate it and give it the requisite room to live and breathe.

In such an environment, it is possible not just to expect tolerance, but to demand it; because competition lives or dies by the degree to which its consequences are accepted.

In opposition to competition stands control, and those that would pursue it are usually motivated by three things: a fear of loss, an aversion to conflict and a love of regulation and restraint – the belief that any given outcome is best obtained by manipulating the rules by which it is achieved. At the extreme, those who advocate control would outlaw competition entirely. But the consequence of that is a culture of ignorance and entitlement, anathema to competition and progress.

There is little to be gained by avoiding conflict or competition. It is born of curiosity and to suppress or manipulate the question it asks is to ensure an unsatisfactory answer. That will only ever fuel resentment and discontent. Such a condition might be temporarily sustainable, but the truth will out and, one way or another, conflict will have its day. It is far better, far healthier for all concerned, to recognise this fact and, rather than fear competition, to embrace it.

A desire to control outcomes is also to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of excellence; for by restricting the parameters in which competition can flourish, one restricts too the nature of its effect, lowering standards and reducing expectation in turn.

In summary, then, competition requires four attitudes: Risk-taking and belief, for inherent to it is the possibility of loss. Agency, for it is both to pursue and establish best practice, and that requires commitment and dedication. The pursuit of excellence, for that is the ideal that underpins healthy competition. And tolerance, for any setback, loss or outcome that is unsatisfactory.

The age of entitlement

A victim-like mentality, however, negates all of these. For the victim, the world imposes itself onto the individual, not vice versa. They cannot take action, for they are wounded and seek recompense in response. They cannot pursue excellence, for that necessitates self-belief and conviction, and they have been stripped of such things. And they cannot tolerate loss, for loss is their default position and one they abhor.

In South Africa today, these things have come together as a powerful urge, a universal impulse towards egalitarianism and the belief that the only cure for what ails us, for that fragility, is parity and consensus.

“We must all be alike,” Captain Beatty says in Fahrenheit 451, “Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against.”

If we are all alike, there can be no victims. Or only victims. But equal in our misery. This egalitarian utopia is an entitlement: the world, sometimes cruel, always random and ultimately indifferent to fate and circumstance, should deliver it. If not, it should be bent to that shape. Pain and suffering grant you entry to it and, in it, no one can rise above the lowest grievance.

That applies as much to thought as it does to policy. No idea, no principle, no ideology, might tower too high above another. For if it does, it will inevitably shroud what remains in its shadow. And all must stand in the light. For all are special. If reason, science and humanism define enlightenment thinking, we are now in the age of entitlement in South Africa, of unreason, superstition and nationalism. And it is nothing new. We are a nation of victims, both real and imagined. Regardless, we wear our pain on our sleeves.

Often, and understandably, it produces shame and self-loathing. But sometimes it is worn with pride, as a ticket into the theatre of grievance or public signpost as to where exactly in the hierarchy of suffering and grief a particular person or group stands.

With regards to the latter, victimhood deals in excuse and uses blame to misdirect any proper interrogation as to its intent; for its satisfaction lies not in affecting change, but in sympathy for its circumstance. It knows, too, that to acknowledge that is to reveal its own addiction – to the attention that accompanies pity – rather than the unrewarding and often thankless risk that agency demands. For an agent, the aspiration to make a difference drives action; for victimhood, that aspiration dies a thousand deaths every day, each one a chance to indulge or delight in any condolence that might come its way.

Victimhood only feigns belief in choice – circumstances have predetermined its direction. Put under increasing pressure, its pretense rationally argued away, it panics, and its explanations become less credible until, ultimately, its enemy becomes unseen, even unheard of, some powerful force plotting in secret quarters. And so, victimhood loves conspiracy and the idea that something out there is making its choices for it, for that is an all-purpose explanation to any difficult question.

Conspiracy

Little attention is paid to conspiracy in South Africa. Strange, for it is ubiquitous and the environment for it, as set out above, favourable indeed.

There are the metaphysical conspiracies, of Gods, spirits, ancestors, witches and wizards, who pump daily into the national bloodstream a steady dose of fatalism. So that, as the bar is systematically lowered on every conceivable front, we demonstrate precious little in the way of electoral punishment for those responsible, for it is the way of things, all this deprivation and decay. For many, all they have ever known.

There are the destructive political conspiracies that have destroyed both institutions and people, embraced in the name of a wild populism that lurks constantly just below the surface. The EFF is today built on conspiracy. Indeed, it is fair to argue it could not survive without it. Its leader, responsible for so much unreason, fear and poisonous gossip, has learnt to manipulate the public mind almost precisely in this way.

In the background, always you can find those less visible threads. There is, for example, a conspiracy of national enthusiasm. Born in 1994, it animates so much false hope and patriotic zeal in the face of reason and evidence that suggests quite the opposite disposition is more appropriate. Its gatekeepers demand an offering to the gods of hope and optimism before one is allowed entry to its citadel. It is, understandably perhaps, a coping mechanism of sorts, and we are often more than willing to sacrifice such things as scepticism and truth to maintain the temporary high its inner sanctum provides.

There is much that has contributed to the creation of an environment so prone to subterfuge and intrigue, and any understanding thereof would require a talk of its own. But a history of genuine secrecy and clandestine control plays an important part, as does the nature of a society generally trapped between the demands of a modern, industrial constitutional democracy and the ravages of poor education and the premodern beliefs and superstitions that define the South African landscape. We are in many ways a Twilight Zone in which magic and human rights coexist.

I would argue the conspiracy theory is today one of the greatest contemporary threats to reason and the scientific method, thus to freedom. In turn, it is one of the most powerful weapons in the hands of demagogues and populists who wish to influence the zeitgeist. Fuelled and easily manipulated by social media – the perfect amalgamation of magic and technology – augmented by a pervasive fatalism and attitude of victimhood, the conspiracy theory defines so much thinking in South Africa today.

And yet it remains undefined itself. The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist, the saying has it. Let us see, then, if we can make the implicit, explicit.

Here are three grand contemporary political conspiracies: the often-made claim that the CIA is manipulating South African politics; the idea of white monopoly capital as an all-controlling force for evil; and the narrative that underpinned Jacob Zuma's election – that he was the victim of political subterfuge.

There are fifteen traits to a conspiracy theory I believe are worth identifying. Let us look at those characteristics of conspiracy theories and see how each of these examples apply, by way of illustration.

The fifteen characteristics of a conspiracy theory

1. *Power:* A conspiracy theory assigns a disproportionate amount of power and influence to a third party. Simultaneously, in doing so, the conspiracist relinquishes a certain amount of power and agency. This binary relationship between the hapless victim of a conspiracy theory and the all-powerful perpetrators intrinsic to it means that the victims can deny personal responsibility for their actions or the consequences thereof.

The narrative that Jacob Zuma was a victim of political subterfuge best illustrates this point, although all three conspiracies apply. If he was in fact innocent of any wrongdoing, then any suggestion otherwise is a conspiracy and the actions prescribed to him false and misleading. Thus, he needn't take responsibility for them. Simultaneously, he could present the Mbeki regime as evil, thereby assigning the former president great but malevolent power, making his own election to office all the more necessary.

That belief, the total inverse of reality, would allow the SACP to declare the following when Zuma was elected president: “With this victory the people of South Africa are sending an important message that never again should we allow abuses of state organs to settle political scores with opponents. It is therefore also a challenge to the incoming government to ensure that state institutions do indeed serve the people and not partisan interests. The SACP is indeed confident that the Zuma-led government will indeed rise up to this and many other challenges, and will play our part in the interests of defending and deepening our democracy in favour of the workers and the poor of our country.”

For those who subscribed to the conspiracy theory, reason was inverted. With it, power.

2. *Expertise*: A conspiracy theory ascribes to those responsible for any plot or subterfuge extraordinary skill and expertise. The perpetrators are capable of incredibly complex manipulation and co-ordination, requiring sublime timing, foresight and execution. In turn, their resources appear vast and unlimited. Their thinking is so Machiavellian it cannot be predetermined, only understood in retrospect, and their control over the vagaries of fate total and absolute.

By way of illustration, the CIA, which the ANC has accused of, among other things, controlling both the former public protector and the opposition, would have needed to perfectly manipulate an unbelievable number of things for those claims to hold true. It would have to have controlled not just Zanele Mbeki, the former President’s wife, who nominated Thuli Madonsela to the ad hoc committee, but to have ensured her selection by said committee and, indeed, even controlled the president himself, to have ensured her confirmation. These sorts of contradictions – that the claim actually implicates the ANC itself – are, as we shall see, inherent to the conspiracy theory.

With regards the ANC, it is perhaps the ultimate contradiction in terms that, in an organisation so defined by spectacular ineptitude and incompetence, we are told to believe there simultaneously exists all-knowing vision, manipulative genius and meticulous, calculating excellence.

3. *Belief*: A conspiracy theory relies on inference, the careful positioning of any half-truth between two truths and the sewing together of disparate pieces of evidence with an invisible thread. At the *moment critique*, thus, always it requires a leap of faith. The purpose is to compel, rather than to convince.

The Nicholson judgment, which appeared on face value to confirm the conspiracy around Jacob Zuma, was the perfect half-truth. Later overturned in a scathing judgment by the Supreme Court, it served to formalise the informal, and legitimate suspicion. But it never dealt with the actual case against Zuma – his relationship with Shabir Shaik – only his general legal process. It mattered not; once incorporated into the grand conspiracy, it served to help eradicate his actual record from the public mind, and overwhelm it with the revelation of ostensible subterfuge.

4. *Illusion and misdirection*: In a conspiracy theory nothing is as it appears. The face value of any given event or circumstance is an illusion, masking a different, more sinister intent. There are red herrings just as there are “red flags”, distinguishable only by the discretion and judgement of the conspiracist. And so, evidence which matches a predetermined pattern can be identified and incorporated into the theory, and that which does not – or even disproves a given theory – can be dismissed as misdirection.

For example, there is no piece of evidence, no reasonable argument or well-substantiated claim that can stand on its own in any of our grand conspiracies. There is no intrinsic truth. Every element is a

piece in a puzzle and only the conspiracist can tell you its final position. In turn, it is only when it has been placed in its position that its true nature can be revealed. A piece of legislation, an act of parliament, a political decision, none of these things have their own internal logic. They are subsumed by the conspiracy theory, and defined by it.

5. *Distrust*: The inevitable by-product of any conspiracy theory is therefore disbelief and distrust. If everything has a double-meaning, then nothing is indicative of an intrinsic truth or character. For this reason, the conspiracist will insist that, from first principles, no one should be trusted and no fact or circumstance be understood in isolation. Meaning is derived from context, not particulars.

As soon as the Nicholson judgment was overthrown, Julius Malema declared that judges could not be trusted. "Judges can be spoken to by any other person", he said, "knowing the tendencies of those ones who are against us. They, the 'dark forces', travel at night. They have got the potential to do anything." He would go on to say that, "We will go to court when we are called, but we know that there is no court in this country that can provide a fair hearing for our president. Our president would never get a fair trial." It was critical to Malema that the criminal justice system be publicly distrusted if his conspiracy theory was to have influence. And again, you see evidence of contradiction: The same system that legitimated the theory, disproved it. And so it should be both simultaneously trusted and distrusted.

6. *Infinite*: Although in the moment a given conspiracy theory might be prescribed a beginning and an end, in truth it has no genesis and no conclusion; these are merely practical necessities to make sense of the now. A conspiracy theory exists but it was never brought into existence. In turn, it never evolves or unfolds in a linear fashion.

White monopoly capital has no final purpose. Its goal is merely to exist and self-replicate. In this way it is eternal, a permanent and omnipresent force for evil that can never be destroyed but always opposed. Ideas like race and colonialism operate in the same way. It is, thus, the perfect enemy – on any given day it can be defeated but the next day it will rise again. And so, once again, it can be exposed and countered by those supposedly brave forces who stand opposed to it.

7. *Victimhood*: Conspiracy theories are propagated by victims of the subterfuge they allude to and, thus, by people with a vested interest in their being true. To this end, a given conspiracy theory, although grand and all-encompassing, is also specific and precise. Its purpose is not just to alter the course of macro-events but the micro-circumstances that define individual lives. It cares as much about the profound as it does the inane.

It is remarkable the degree to which white monopoly capital, this grand force for total control, that has its hands on all levers of power, takes a direct and specific interest in the various petty machinations of, say, the ANC or the EFF. It seems to control particular speeches in parliament and individual newspaper stories, even specific tweets, all of which, ironically, are damaging to those parties. Its purpose is as much to manipulate the entire edifice as it is to make a misery of the banalities that define the day-to-day affairs of political parties.

8. *Enemies*: Intrinsic to any conspiracy theory is the idea of the enemy. They can be found inside or outside an organisation, society or nation. The enemy can exist in name or be hidden and secretive. But, if they are named, that is to create an archetype, not to describe a real person. In this way, the idea of the enemy, always, is perfect in its conception. They suffer none of the human flaws and ambiguities that define us all. The same applies to the group, organisation or nation they represent. The enemy can be subject to the will of a

hierarchy – a leader or inner circle of influence – but the hierarchy is never subject to the will of the enemy: there is no internal contradiction or conflict. It is totally pure, completely orderly and highly regimented.

Whether it is the CIA or judges or white monopoly capital, it matters not. We do not know who they control or where their agents have been placed. At least not pre-emptively. They could be anyone or any organisation. But, retrospectively, it is possible to determine exactly who these people are. We know that the Oppenheims and the Ruperts oversee white monopoly capital, for example. But we do not know how. Presumably they meet to plot and plan. And we know that their plans are perfectly conceived and implemented. The enemy, unlike political parties *per se*, suffers no internal factionalism or fallout. Nicky Oppenheimer and Johann Rupert have never disagreed about anything because it is the idea of them, pure and true, that defines them, rather than their human nature, with its own flaws, ambivalences and conflicts. They are perfectly evil.

9. *They must be known to exist:* No conspiracy theory is unknown. Simultaneously, no conspiracy theory is exposed by the perpetrators of it. It is defined by those who are victims of it and, in this way, constitutes a weapon in their hands, for they can be constantly refashioned and remoulded to ensure their integrity and veracity comply with an ever-changing reality.

White monopoly capital, the conspiracy theory has it, just like the CIA, controls much in this country. There are factions inside the ANC, in the government and certainly inside the opposition, beholden to it. But quite what its particular agenda is, is difficult to say. Only those who define the conspiracy theory – in this case, the EFF – are able to tell you. Only they can see its influence and purpose. A conspiracy theory is not merely facilitated, it is controlled, and only the EFF can tell you who its agents are, why they make certain decisions and what their purpose is.

10. *Amorality:* Conspiracy theories boast an ostensible morality, in that they seemingly define quite clearly the good from the bad. But on which side an idea or action or individual falls is not determined by intrinsic moral worth, but, instead, by its proximity to and relationship with the theory itself. Willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, anyone can be an agent of subterfuge. For the conspiracist, special condemnation is reserved for those who deny the truth of their belief; that, from first principles, is evidence of complicity. Thus, people's actions are not moral or immoral in and of themselves, they are merely useful metaphors for something far bigger and inherently and irrevocably good or evil.

This point, about the inherent moral virtue of any conspiracy theory is important. It allows the conspiracist to pressure people into subscribing to it – for which the real test is not the idea but the character of the person relaying it. To question the theory is to question the moral worth of the person who is advocating it. The ANC will tell you, for example, to question Jacob Zuma's leadership is to question his liberation credentials. This is a particular problem when it comes to political leaders who wield much influence and sway.

11. *Morality:* That said, conspiracy theories do serve a moral purpose. They allow those who advocate for them to frame themselves as selfless and virtuous – a benevolent agent of truth, standing tall and strong in the face of malevolence and deceit.
12. *Feigned rationality:* A conspiracy theory uses the language of rationality – truth, reason, evidence and argument – to obscure irrationality – emotion, distrust, hearsay and animus. It achieves this by overwhelming its audience with evidence, the majority of which makes the same point in a different fashion. Nevertheless, this great swathe of data and anecdotes is

inevitably woven together by faith, not reason. In this way, any ambiguity is pushed into a corner, to become an absolute certainty.

You need do little more than make your way through the many and various affidavits and arguments presented by Jacob Zuma's advocates and lawyers over the past decade to illustrate this point. All of which, millions upon millions of words, all paid for by the public, culminated in the meek concession in September 2017 that the NPA decision to drop its charges against Zuma was indeed irrational.

13. *Detail:* Supplementing this is a reliance on great detail, complexity and technical nuance. The trivial is given inordinate significance and the deeply meaningful reduced to the banal. The conspiracy theory can thus generate ambiguity just as quickly as it can demolish it. In each case, using it either to confirm or undermine a fact or circumstance as is necessary. Conspiracy theories are built on questions, the answer to which is always suggested but never confirmed. And so the best questions are the ones that cannot be answered. All of this engenders in the lay person a sense that the case before them is authoritative and commanding in the moment, yet, without the belief of the conspiracist, difficult to replicate in a calm fashion or with different words later on. Charisma and rhetoric are the glue that hold a conspiracy theory together; they are provided by the conspiracist and, because their belief and passion is so fundamental in nature, the theory inevitably suffers a credibility deficit when presented by someone less invested in it, and in reasonable terms.

Julius Malema has built his political reputation around the damning question. He alludes to the influence of white monopoly capital, say, drops in details about internal ANC politics and then asks why a certain person behaved in a certain way. Once delivered to his audience and the media, the question and the context he has artificially generated does the work for him and his own belief compels those listening to him, to infuse some baseless suggestion into their own thinking.

14. *Contradiction:* Conspiracy theories are inherently contradictory, on a wide range of fronts. They are hidden but obvious; one need only believe. They are complex but simple; one need only accept the grand design. They are sophisticated but clumsy, the perpetrators brilliantly secretive yet constantly leaving clues; one need only know where to look. And they are vague and yet incredibly specific; one need only extrapolate from one's personal experience outward, for any given event or circumstance.

We have already seen a great many contradictions inherent to those political conspiracy theories we have examined, but consider this: Why would monopoly capital want no economic growth? If it controls the economy, if it is motivated by greed and self-preservation, why would it undermine its very foundation? If the judiciary is, as Julius Malema claims, "controlled by white people", why would justice Nicholson find in favour of Zuma? But for the conspiracist these contradictions tend to prove, not disprove, the theory. Ambrose Bierce argued that the saying, "the exception proves the rule" was idiotic. It should be, he said, "the exception tests the rule". But for conspiracists the original formulation serves their purposes perfectly well.

15. *Unproveable:* Because a conspiracy theory is more belief than argument, it cannot ever be disproved absolutely, for data is competing with anecdote, and facts with hidden meaning. In this way, a conspiracy theory is both self-replicating and self-reinforcing, it produces its own justification by drawing on its own conclusions to incorporate new evidence or data into its grand narrative.

Let us leave the final word to Julius Malema, who has featured prominently in this analysis. When the Nicholson judgment was overturned, Malema said in typically forthright fashion, "you cannot

prove a conspiracy in court". And he was right. The truth is, you cannot prove a conspiracy theory anywhere. It is immune to proof, thus to reason. It is its own justification and self-reinforcing. In this way, the ultimate weapon in the hands of irrationality.

The age of great deceit

Political conspiracy theories are by no means unique to South Africa. We see them the world over, an age old trick to deflect attention and outsource responsibility. But you will notice that it is in societies in the grip of demagoguery and political nativism that they flourish. The political conspiracy theory has become the defining feature of South African debate.

Our language is now infused with the lexicon of conspiracy: "cabal", "secret", "plot", "scheme", "agenda", "faction", "control", "puppet", "third force", "coup", "clique", "group", "taken over", "rebellion". It is rare indeed to find an analysis or political news story devoid of these words. They animate our understanding of current affairs.

Accompanying it is deceit. The common lie is now a staple part of public debate, for the simple lie is little more than a self-contained conspiracy theory itself. Today, it is hardwired into most public explanations and ostensible accountability. And revealed on just as regular a basis, fuelling distrust and suspicion. In those places where truth and reason is supposed to be upheld and examined, the parameters in which it is allowed to operate have been so narrowed as to reduce them to a farce.

Parliament, normally a forum for rationality and critical interrogation, has lobotomised itself in the name of respect. And every political party plays its part. You cannot accuse anyone of lying or deceiving, whatever the evidence, lest their reputation or feelings be hurt. They are all "honourable members", we are told, and argument must flow from that first principle.

And society more broadly has followed parliament's lead. We are all "honourable members", and no one's integrity may be impugned. The public can trash and destroy infrastructure on a monumental scale, but it cannot be described as violent and irresponsible. Always one must respect the voters. There is much to be said about this particular conspiracy of silence.

But the conspiracy theory does not rely on insults to survive. It is far more pernicious. And its ability to camouflage itself in the language of reason, means it can destroy rationality from the inside. Immune to the scientific method – for any counterfactual can be transformed into a fact; it lives within us all – for anyone can be exposed as an agent – and it is omnipresent and yet without form, thus, it cannot ever be prosecuted. The conspiracy theory defies all the rules of enlightenment thinking.

When it comes to the marketplace of ideas, it destroys competition. If you are a rationalist, you feel duty-bound to answer the question "why?" But a conspiracy does not want its questions answered; its questions are the weapons. It seeks to imply an answer, but that is all. No truth can compete with it, because it is bound by reason – thus, it can fail. But a conspiracy theory can never fail. And it need only be right on occasion to confirm its infinite truth.

In this way, the conspiracy theory defies all the laws of healthy competition. It requires no risk, because it cannot fail. It requires no agency, for it cannot ever be controlled or influenced, but it can nevertheless determine everything. It has no interest in excellence or its component values because the purpose of a conspiracy theory is to manipulate preconceived outcomes. It has no imagination or curiosity. And there is no tolerance, least of all for criticism or evidence that questions its foundation.

The fourth estate, obsessed as it is with the politics of personality, as opposed to the interrogation of ideology, policy and ideas, has done a great deal to facilitate the hold the political conspiracy theory now boasts over the public mind.

Everything, to one degree or another, is reduced to a conspiracy. Who secretly controls who, which faction met when, the hidden benefits of decision-making for unseen but vested interests. In state capture we have the ultimate conspiracy theory: the idea that the entire state was controlled by some external and malevolent force, its agents everywhere, waiting to be exposed.

None of this is to deny the facts of the matter. That there was corruption on a grand scale is now indisputable. But in truth it was no different in style or substance from any of the corruption to have defined the ANC for twenty years. From the Arms Deal, to Chancellor House to the Oilgate scandal (in which public money was funnelled via PetroSA into the ANC's election coffers), the ANC has always used the state to benefit its own. The point is the frame of reference – even the phrase itself – is born of a society enmeshed in conspiracy.

The very idea of state capture is a symptom of the time.

It is an ironic state of affairs, for the grandest conspiracy of all – the ANC's abuse of power and failure to deliver, illustrated by dead bodies just as by uneducated minds, the unemployed and enough evidence to plough any other administration under, remains largely immune to critical interrogation. And it's not even a conspiracy; you can literally read the ANC's grand plans to control everything, in its own words. But the ANC, protected by a hundred different myths, able to deploy a wide range of conspiratorial weapons at will, and all facilitated by a media that hungers for subterfuge and intrigue, needn't worry about that. It has a "good story to tell".

Ultimately, a conspiracy theory works like a spell. Once cast upon you, it renders you invulnerable to rational thought and reason. No fact, no argument, no piece of evidence can be interrogated on its own terms. Everything represents something else.

To be sure, there are plots and plans out there, and factions and secret agendas. You can be sure they are no less or no more ramshackle undertakings than formal government action. But rarely are they all-purpose explanations for events. When that assumption becomes your primary frame of reference, your default position, you lose the ability to separate fact from fiction. In turn, the ability to identify trends and patterns over time, because all that matters is the here and now. Conspiracies trap you inside a contemporary bubble, and you cannot see very far beyond its boundaries.

Nhlanhla Nene is a case in point. Once a hero, now a villain, his behaviour was never properly interrogated or subjected to the forensic scrutiny Jacob Zuma's was, because it did not fit the conspiracy. On any given day, his role in the grand narrative was predetermined. Until it wasn't.

The consequence of all this is a great age of deceit. Hard facts, which accurately describe the state of the nation, count for little: ten million people unemployed, a disastrous education system, a monstrous wage bill, negligible economic growth, a failed land reform programme, a survey that says people don't experience racism to the degree social media would have you believe. These things have become mere metaphors for a series of grand malevolent forces we cannot see or pin down but which determine or predetermine everything. And so facts hold no intrinsic value, they shape no decision-making and they negate rather than necessitate political accountability.

In a recent column, on the back of President Ramaphosa's much-vaunted investment conference, in reality an emergency debt-relief programme, one commentator wrote in response to criticism that much of what was promised was, in fact, simply repackaged, earlier investment: "if the only response to the investment pledges is to grouse that they are not new, that's to completely miss the point."

The conspiracy of national enthusiasm. That is the point. And that is the measure of the event's success or failure. But, then, it could only ever be a success.

In the place of hard evidence, a plethora of myth-making and conspiracy, of lies and subterfuge, intrigue and implication, now exists. It is a permanent fantasyland out there. A thousand competing fairy-tales of good and evil, heroes and villains, vying for your attention. And they have it, too. We are now locked into this great age of deceit, and it would seem there is little prospect of it being reversed.

To do that would require the enlightenment itself; for it has yet to fully manifest in South Africa. Nor was it ever welcomed. Were we to experience it, were we really to invest in what Pinker calls "human flourishing", we would have to kill all the monsters in our midst. That is something we can never do, for they are the very things from which we derive meaning and purpose. And if they were ever gone, we would then have only ourselves to blame.

Thank you.
Gareth van Onselen