Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *Conspiracy and Contingency: How to Deal with Fake Necessities* (London and New York: Anthem Books, 2025); 234 pp.; ISBN: 978-1-83999-313-8; ePDF.

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein proposes that conspiracist worldviews are often adopted due to the "the desire to find apparently reasonable explanations for phenomena that are purely random and contingent" (p. 1). His philosophical analysis focuses on contingency and necessity. There is evidence that human evolutionary psychology seeks causes for effects and is distressed by epistemic uncertainty. Botz-Bornstein notes that conspiracy is a problematic term, and includes both warranted and unwarranted theories, and in fact conspiracist thinking has an aesthetic dimension which means many adopt them "simply because they like them" (p. 4). Because philosophy does not proceed on a case-by-case basis, it is possible to see "groundless conspiracy theories as something more akin to art" (p. 16). Botz-Bornstein is therefore interested in the people who adopt them and promote them. An important aesthetic preference for the conspiracy mindset is "contingency refusal" (p. 24). The author's refusal to consider the content of conspiracy theories works; to say the earth is flat is false but to ask why people hold flat-earther beliefs is more interesting.

Chapter 2, "Alternative Modernities," explores interesting ideas such as resemblances and differences between conspiracy theories and religious fundamentalisms, and the hostility between the utopian Enlightenment and the conspiratorial frame that resents utopianism. Diverse anti-Enlightenment groups include "Islamic terrorists, Brexiters, and flat-earthers" (p. 38), people who feel excluded from the perfection of modernity. Botz-Bernstein ties conspiracy theories to the Enlightenment temporally and calls the conspiracy mindset "alt-modern" (p. 46). Chapter 3, "Coincidence, Accident, Virus," is a closer look at contingency, with the focus on accident and coincidence. Accidents are unpredictable, while coincidence "is similar to a disease or a virus" (p. 55), which opens the discussion of COVID-19. Botz-Bornstein contrasts class societies (equality focused) with risk societies (in which the desire for equality is replaced by fear), drawing on the work of Ulrich Beck. Conspiracists preferred to believe vaccines were a dangerous risk of harm and that taking a chance on the virus was better.

Chapter 4, "Animism and the Sense of Order," considers the attribution of powers or energies to processes that are naturalistic, a "procedure [that] is comparable to what various religions do when they see random events as 'signs' supposed to indicate that their guru is always right or that God wanted to speak to them" (p. 69). This animism relates to the desire for order. The conspiratorial mindset relates coincidence to "a heterodox order known only to skeptical specialists or the initiated" (p. 77), with an ambivalence also seen in speculative fiction. The author considers ressentiment as a motivator of proponents of conspiracy theories and relates this work on conspiracism to his earlier work on kitsch. Chapter 6, "Contingency Though the Ages: Determination and Mystification," reviews historical contexts such as Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and Chapter 7, "Evolution, Meritocracy, and Fake Science," examines core conditions of modernity and traces the undermining of science in the late twentieth century. Trends in German and French philosophy are reviewed; this book oscillates between being rather light and popular-culture oriented, and a serious and demanding exercise in the history of ideas.

Chapter 10, "The Aesthetics of Contingency," argues that the pattern formed of contingency and necessity "does not only concern art in the strictest sense but also the 'art of life', and thus ethics, or at least a mixture of ethics (which is about the right actions) and aesthetics" (p. 178). Botz-Bornstein considers the ethics of merit, then examines algorithms in contemporary life, speculating that they are connected to the creation of authenticity. He observes that Nietzsche would despise algorithms as they are "emblematic of the rules followed by the weak who fatalistically submit to necessities" (p. 184).

Chapter 11, "Contingency in Eastern Philosophies," shifts attention to non-Western philosophical systems. The exposition of Buddhism and Daoism are competent, but the attempt to unravel conspiracist mindsets by reference to the fundamental unreality of the material world is less successful. The invocation of dreams as a realm that clarifies reality because "in dreams but also in our everyday reality are necessity and contingency blurred" (p. 205) is interesting but nascent. The "Conclusion" floats scepticism toward conspiracism (an inversion of the conspiracist's scepticism toward the Enlightenment rationalist worldview) but argues that contingency theories are not the opposite of the conspiracy mindset. Nevertheless, he proposes that contingency "can be accepted, and sometimes even seen as a chance" (p. 215). This is the best defence we have against conspiracism. It is this hopeful note that captures the reader as this difficult, attractive, unconventional and interesting book concludes.

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