

A Parallel Universe: Conspiracy Theories and the Limits of Education

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This case is set in Germany at a Gesamtschule: a comprehensive school for children aged 11-18. After the fourth grade, children in Germany may—depending on their abilities, grades, the wishes of their parents, and the recommendations of their teachers—attend one of four different kinds of secondary schools: Hauptschule, Realschule, Gymnasium or Gesamtschule. While some types of schools focus on a vocational or university track, the Gesamtschule combines all educational tracks in one school. The Gesamtschule brings together students of all ability levels and socioeconomic backgrounds and typically is less selective and has a more heterogeneous student population than, for instance, a Gymnasium. The school in the case is grappling with the role of conspiracy theories in the classroom. The public debate about conspiracy theories in Germany was partly triggered by the election of Donald Trump in the United States and also by the rise of right-wing movements and parties within Germany as well as Europe more generally. The debate intensified after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing formation of political protest movements like the so-called ‘Querdenker’-movement, whose political views relied heavily on different types of conspiracy theories. The Querdenker-movement consists of a mixture of individuals with varying political leanings, including right-wing extremists. The political role of conspiracy theories in Germany has become increasingly visible through members of the Querdenker-movement demonstrating in the streets with signs that depicted their conspiracy beliefs.

Peter raised his hand, and Mrs. Faulkner instinctively held her breath.

As the country continued to grapple with the changes Covid-19 had brought to schools, Mrs. Faulkner had chosen to cover the history of pandemics in her social studies class today. She had begun with a primary source document: a newspaper article from 1918, detailing the impact of the Spanish flu on society. Then she had asked her students to compare the societal reactions from 1918 to those from 2020 and into the present.

“Of course, the situation in 1918 was different; they didn’t understand the disease well and had no vaccines like we do today. But what sounds familiar in this article?” She had scanned the room for responses.

Peter’s hand had shot up instantly—of course. Mrs. Faulkner had searched for other volunteers, but many students were eyeing Peter warily, reluctant to raise their hands. While she had managed to catch two students’ eyes, they just shrugged and looked away. After a minute, she exhaled and said: “Ok, Peter, what’s on your mind?”

“It’s pretty clear to me that the so-called Spanish Flu was part of a big plan. Pandemics are powerful tools to control the population— our bodies *and* our minds. Isn’t it a rather strange ‘coincidence’ that almost exactly 100 years after the Spanish Flu, we allegedly face this global pandemic? It’s all about who controls the information. The ‘official’ history here,” he announced, brandishing the course textbook, “leaves out a lot of relevant sources. History is written by those in power, you know.”

Mrs. Faulkner sighed. At one time, she had loved Peter’s contributions to class. He was intelligent, insightful, and sometimes critical. Unlike many of his classmates, he had a passion for history and current events. He read the newspaper every day and had devoured the many books she had lent him about topics ranging from the French Revolution to the Vietnam War. But something had changed in him. He’d become isolated, socially withdrawn. Rather than borrowing books written by historians, he

spent more and more time reading online, pulled into conspiracy websites making inflammatory claims using questionable evidence.

Mrs. Faulkner gathered her patience; she had been through too many conversations like this with Peter, and she worried that this one would again take up valuable class time. But she couldn't just let that point stand.

"Although those in power do sometimes manipulate official accounts," she conceded, "we shouldn't infer that all official history, written by experts, is a big hoax. There are certain things that we can know are objectively, historically incorrect. For example, Germany was not invaded by Poland in 1939, as some people claim; Germany was the invader. You're right to be skeptical in principle, Peter, since there was indeed a conspiracy going on during that time. Germany claimed that Poland was attacking, but this was a straightforward lie. Throughout history you do find networks¹ of powerful people who engaged in conspiracies to further their political interests—like the Nazi regime did. But this doesn't mean that we can't distinguish between historical facts and fiction."

"Exactly, I think we're finally on the same page," Peter interjected. "As I said, official sources can't be trusted. If people had been more critical back then, Hitler would have never risen to power in the first place. And yet we've learned nothing. People still believe the propaganda the state gives them: they all wear masks and get vaccinated, just like the mainstream media tells them to."

"Peter," Mrs. Faulker retorted, "people wear masks because they're critically evaluating a serious situation. But I'd like to hear what other—"

"This has nothing to do with critical thinking," Peter interrupted, visibly frustrated. "Most people behave like sheep. And skeptical people who use their brains are stigmatized as 'conspiracy theorists.' You should always ask yourself: in whose interest it is that people believe a particular version of history? We need to seek out alternative sources and alternative perspectives."

As Peter spoke, Mrs. Faulkner watched the other students. As in previous discussions, some rolled their eyes, while others simply looked uncomfortable. But several of Peter's classmates nodded eagerly and leaned toward him, ready to hear more. Concerned for those students, Mrs. Faulker attempted to find common ground while debunking Peter's more radical claims.

"Ok, that's a good point, Peter," she began. "But the comparison you make between our current liberal and democratic government and the Nazi government is problematic and just wrong. People are free to voice their opinions in our society today. We all have equal rights here, which obviously wasn't true in Nazi Germany. Now, I do want to hear what others think about this article."

"A liberal democracy?" Peter countered. "A country that even considers vaccine mandates hardly qualifies as liberal. Don't I have the right to decide for myself what I want to do with my body? And quite a few people believe that the vaccines are much more dangerous than any virus could ever be. As I said, you should check your sources. To get closer to the truth, we need more than one perspective, especially the official perspective of so-called 'experts.'"

"Damn straight," one boy said to his neighbor. Meanwhile, a girl across the room was on the verge of tears; Mrs. Faulkner knew that she had lost multiple family members to Covid-19, before the vaccine had been developed.

"I'm glad you brought up expertise, Peter, since the people who propagate the views you're promoting generally do not have the relevant expertise to make the claims they do. But we'll have to leave it at that." Mrs. Faulkner looked at her watch. With only a few minutes left in class, she

¹ See, for instance: Ferguson, Niall (2019): *The Square and the Tower. Networks, Hierarchies and the Struggle for Global Power*. Allen Lane. According to Ferguson, the "problem with conspiracy theorists is that, as aggrieved outsiders, they invariably misunderstand and misrepresent the way networks operate. In particular, they tend to assume that elite networks covertly and easily control formal power structures. My own research – as well as my own experience – suggests that this is not the case. On the contrary, informal networks usually have a highly ambivalent relationship to established institutions, and sometimes even a hostile one." (ibid.; p. xix).

explained the homework and silently berated herself for allowing Peter's perspectives to dominate the discursive space once again.

After class, Mrs. Faulkner reflected on Peter's development over the last few years. Peter had been one of the more promising students at Sophie Scholl² School in Dortmund, an upper secondary comprehensive school³ in a district known for its socioeconomic problems. Although most students came from low-income families, the school was highly culturally diverse, with a sizable percentage of students whose first language was not German. While these factors had at times created difficult working conditions, she believed that the teachers fostered a stimulating educational environment for all students. The ethos of the school was both inclusive and dialogical, with a strong egalitarian and democratic orientation towards "respecting differences," openly discussing controversial issues, and promoting critical thinking. Teachers were expected to nurture an atmosphere of charitable debate and not to shy away from addressing conflicts and controversies in their classes, which Mrs. Faulkner really appreciated.

Peter's educational achievements and personal development in his early years at the school had been generally positive. And he had always been a favorite of Mrs. Faulkner. By the time he turned 16, however, something changed in him. In the beginning, the teachers just chalked it up to puberty. Peter began to isolate himself more and more from his classmates, though he and Mrs. Faulkner remained close.

When the pandemic hit Germany and schools closed down for a couple of weeks, Peter became a committed member of the so-called "Querdenker"-movement.⁴ The longer the pandemic lasted, the more extremist Peter became. As it turned out, Covid-related conspiracies were just the beginning: the deeper he immersed himself in the world of conspiracy theories, the more he questioned his old worldview. He told Mrs. Faulkner that he felt like a secret agent⁵ who had finally begun to understand the true nature of world history.

Thinking back to today's class period, Mrs. Faulkner couldn't believe how much her relationship with Peter had deteriorated. She no longer knew how to handle the way he questioned her authority and refused to engage in rational dialogue. She had made no progress today—she had simply given him a stage for his views yet again.⁶ But she still cared deeply for him, and she wanted to help him. She simply didn't know how to help when he was so closed-minded. He seemed to live in a parallel universe.

Entering the teachers' room, Mrs. Faulkner saw her colleagues Mr. Berger and Mrs. Schmitz. They had discussed Peter's worrisome development many times before. Today they read her distress on her face.

² Sophie Scholl was a young political activist and part of the White Rose non-violent resistance group, which was killed by the Nazi regime together with her brother Hans. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophie_Scholl (Last accessed on 06.01.2022). The school's values reflect Scholl's commitment to democratic ideals.

³ The Sophie Scholl School is a *Gesamtschule*, a type of school for children ages 11-18, is akin to an American high school in that all educational tracks are contained in one school. In other cases, these various vocational and university tracks are conducted in different schools (*Hauptschule*, *Realschule*, *Gymnasium*). A *Gesamtschule* typically is less selective and has a more heterogeneous student population than, for instance, a *Gymnasium*.

⁴ This movement is a mixture of individuals with varying political leanings, including right-wing extremists, who either radically doubt that Covid-19 exists or believe that it's all part of a big conspiracy initiated by Bill Gates and others. On the Querdenker movement, see: Reichardt, Sven (ed.) (2021): *Die Misstrauensgemeinschaft der "Querdenker"*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

⁵ Recent research suggests that one of the reasons why people adopt conspiracy theories is that they find it entertaining to engage with them: Van Prooijen, Willem/Ligthart, Joline/Rosema, Sabine/Xu, Yang (2021): The entertainment value of conspiracy theories. In: *British Journal of Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12522>.

⁶ For the psychological mechanisms, such as 'confirmation bias' or the 'backfire effect,' underlying this tendency of conspiracy theorists to immunize their views against critique, see: Van Prooijen, Jan-Willem (2018): *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*. London, New York: Routledge.

“What is it?” Mr. Berger asked.

“I just had another debate with Peter about his conspiracies. I’m really worried about that kid,” sighed Mrs. Faulkner.

“I’m starting to worry more about his classmates,” Mr. Berger replied. “Misinformation is spreading like a virus in my classes. The more time we use to discuss this stuff, the more we legitimize his ‘theories.’ I worry that other students are starting to believe these are normal political views.”

“Yes, several of my students were agreeing with him today,” Mrs. Faulkner admitted.

“Ok, that *is* a problem. But when it comes to Peter himself, I’m not so pessimistic—I think it’s only a phase,” Mrs. Schmitz explained. “We just need to keep questioning his views and over time he’ll see he’s on the wrong track.”

“Yes, but time is exactly the point,” Mr. Berger responded. “We are spending so much time on this boy and his ideas that we’re neglecting the other students’ needs. I cannot keep having these debates about unreasonable and frankly crazy views, while most of my students are struggling with the real effects of the pandemic. Think about Susanne – she barely can write a single proper German sentence. But I’m supposed to engage with Peter’s fantasy world? No, the next time Peter starts with this stuff, I’m going to tell him to focus on Goethe’s *Faust*, instead of the Illuminati.”

“Yes, and he’ll probably tell you that Goethe was a member of the Illuminati and that you should check your sources,” Mrs. Faulkner chuckled ruefully, shaking her head.

“Exactly, this has to stop!” Mr. Berger emphasized. “I agree that Peter is a very intelligent and promising student, and I care about him, too. But we need to think about the other students. Some of his ‘theories’ have clear antisemitic undertones—like when he says that all ‘official’ history books were written by the Rothschilds.⁷ Did you know that Anton in your class is Jewish? We have to protect Peter’s classmates. These ‘theories’ do not belong in the classroom, not in this school and not in this country with our history. It’s simply not acceptable.”

“Agreed,” Mrs. Schmitz said. “But Peter’s just a kid. We can’t leave him alone to deal with this.”

“I also don’t want to give up on him,” Mr. Berger clarified, “but I cannot see what else we can do. I never thought I would say it, but I really think it is hopeless. We can’t convince conspiracy theorists by rational means. I mean, my family couldn’t celebrate Christmas together this year for the first time in three decades because my brother fell in with conspiracy theorists. He now refuses to get vaccinated even to protect our mother, who is high risk, as you know. I tried everything to persuade him, and everything failed. If I can’t even reach my own brother, what can we do as teachers? Seriously, if not even scientific experts and professional politicians know how to handle these issues, what can we do?”

“I’m so sorry. What a terrible thing to happen to your family,” Mrs. Schmitz sympathized. “But as teachers, we can’t give up on a kid, whatever his beliefs and wherever they may come from. And giving up is certainly not in line with the ethos of our school. We can’t preach dialogue and critical thinking and then shut students down every time they say things out of line with our expectations.”

“True,” Mrs. Faulkner agreed, “but I doubt that what’s going on with Peter counts as ‘critical thinking,’ and we certainly don’t want to foster just any type of debate in our school. There are limits to what counts as a reasonable controversy, and his views are irrational.”

“Yes, sure, but we have seen harder cases,” Mrs. Schmitz reminded them. “Remember Andre Jacobi? He was truly addicted to computer games, but we didn’t give up on him, and now he’s studying to be

⁷ The Rothschilds are a famous Jewish family of bankers, who in the 19th were the “richest people in the world,” perhaps even “the richest family in all history” (Ferguson, Niall 2000: *The House of Rothschild. The World’s Banker 1849-1999*. New York, Penguin Books, p. xxiii). Their phenomenal wealth is certainly one of the reasons why the Rothschilds have been the object of (usually antisemitic) conspiracy theories throughout history and even today.

a neurosurgeon. I've seen it many times: with constant effort and care, many obstacles can be overcome."

"You worked so hard with Andre. You really have worked wonders before." Mrs. Faulkner smiled fondly at her colleague. "But Andre was receptive to our help. Peter doesn't seem to hear a word we say."

"What about his parents? Did you talk to them?" Mrs. Schmitz inquired.

"Not yet," Mrs. Faulkner responded, "but I assume that they play an important role in this mess. I've heard that they actively engage in the Querdenker-scene."

"Given how deeply Peter is immersed in his conspiracy world, I'm not surprised," Mrs. Schmitz nodded.

"I'm pretty sure all we'll get from them is another round of fairy tales," Mr. Berger warned. "Besides, you don't want trouble with these Querdenker guys.⁸ The papers report that many of them are becoming increasingly radical. Some even are considering violence as a response to current policies."

"I still have to try. I'll talk to them next week at parents' day," Mrs. Faulkner replied. "It may not be my business what they think about politics. But it is my business what happens here. Their son is drifting into this conspiracy world and spreading his ideas in our school. I need to talk to them even if nothing comes of it. I don't think we should fear these Querdenker guys, but then again, they definitely mean trouble... What crazy times we live in." She sighed.

Mrs. Faulkner left the meeting even more uncertain about how she should position herself in the classroom. Should she engage in more discussion to publicly deconstruct Peter's views? Would this help Peter—or his classmates? Should she just shut Peter down next time and write him off as a lost cause? Or should she simply ignore his statements and not engage in a debate in order to keep the peace? But wouldn't it be irresponsible not to take a clear stand here—despite political pressure from outside the school—especially around safety issues like vaccination? And what about the dialogical ethos of the school? What was the right thing to do?

⁸ There has been quite a bit of debate in the German media about political pressure on teachers, among others from the Querdenker movement and right-wing political parties. There have been disciplinary complaints against teachers because they were allegedly not sufficiently neutral, and there were online platforms, where students and parents could report teachers for partisan behavior.