Review of

*Misbelief* by Dan Ariely. Harper Collins, New York, 2023.

Subtitle: What makes rational people believe irrational things

“The scope of the problem is overwhelming—far beyond what policing social media alone can achieve—and too often our limited solutions are shaped by partisan politics and individual interpretations of truth.”

Dust jacket quote

Ariely is a professor of psychology and behavioral economics and so interprets misbelief through these lenses. He did a series of experiments to explore how people react to messages and situations that confirm untrue patterns and the psychological and social mechanisms that lead people to believe absurd things with great fervor.

Ariely jokingly calls this “a parallel universe where my Illuminati friends and I were designing fiendish plans.” His consulting on Covid-19 public health issues led to him being put in the “evil” category along with Bill Gates, Hillary Clinton, Dr. Fauci, et al. A vaccine denier helpfully sent Ariely Ivermectin, a horse wormer that fraudulent studies said helped cure Covid.

His explanations of how people’s minds are kidnapped or fall down the rabbit holes of misbelief include:

1. Emotional elements. People under severe stress are vulnerable to picking villains as a way to regain control.
2. Cognitive elements. Disinformation assembly techniques like confirmation bias (seeking sources that agree with us). Motivated reasoning (connecting the dots to get the picture you want), Solutions bias (rejecting belief in a problem, like global warming, if you don’t like the solution, ending fossil fuel use). Overconfidence (people tend to think they know more than they do). Heuristic shortcuts (we are lazy and use a few clues to make decisions rather than digging into the details). Conspiracy theories are like fast food—designed to be appealing.
3. Personality elements. Lack of trust, narcissism, hindsight bias, seeing patterns where none exist, being prone to misremembering. Conjunction fallacy—things happened together so one must have caused the other.
4. Social elements. Becoming estranged from your relationships with people who don’t share the misbelief fantasy. Getting positive reinforcement and meaning from being part of the insiders who know about alien abductions, the plot to kill people with Covid vaccines, etc. Once in a tribe of misbelievers, it is emotionally difficult to escape.

The “strange but true” examples of misbeliefs Ariely describes include some beyond belief, yet so strongly believed that they motivate death threats against harmless professors (Ariely in this case).

“In the 2022 elections some Republican candidates railed against a bizarre and disturbing trend that was happening in schools: the teachers were putting out litter boxes for children who identify as cats. As many as twenty different politicians mentioned the “growing crisis” including elected members of Congress.” P. 258.

Ariely speculates that in some cases the misbelievers know that their wild claims are false but regard them as a kind of code for the real, bigger problem. If it was easy to believe, you wouldn’t need faith in Trump (or aliens, or whatever) to believe it.

Clearly more outrageous claims get more clicks and more publicity and clicks earn money from advertisers. The litter box claim may have morphed from a joke some parent posted who was offended by bathrooms for trans students. Social media clearly allows rumors to grow and metastasize into monsters. Claims grow more exaggerated as they bounce around social media.

Ariely points out that the tendency to believe conspiracy theories and false assertions is not unique to any political party—both the left and right have pet conspiracy theories.

Personal opinion: I don’t think we need to be too evenhanded here. People on the left may believe John Kennedy might have been killed by CIA but, in my opinion that is plausible given documented CIA murders of foreign leaders and Alan Dulles track record. And the CIA’s feelings of betrayal when Kennedy refused to bomb Cuba during the Bay of Pigs invasion. And his rumored decision to get out of Vietnam after the 1964 election. That would have been enough for him to be considered a traitor sentenced to death by right wingers in the CIA.

No proof of this, just a reasonable, in my opinion, suspicion. The fact that I’m not sure, keeps me from being in the wing-nut category like the right-wing people who believe climate change is a Chinese hoax regardless of overwhelming evidence that it is real and caused by fossil fuel emissions.

Left wing conspiracy theories are mostly quite different from the theory that Democrats are pedophiles doing their perversions in the basement of a pizza restaurant in Chevy Chase, Maryland. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pizzagate_conspiracy_theory> for the story. The pizza restaurant story has no basis in fact and motivated death threats, indicating a degree of totally unjustified certainty in dupes who were fooled by the lies.

In each of his chapters Ariely offers “hopefully helpful” ideas for how to avoid falling down the misbelief funnel or ways to reclaim those who have. How to find a more balanced and rational approach to searching for truth. These all make sense and might be useful for talking to your crazy uncle. For example, rather than presenting facts (that will be dismissed as more fake news), listen, ask questions.

Look for the psychological motives and try to deal with those. If stress is a motivator, try to reduce stress. Look for common ground. Show you care about the person with the crazy beliefs and accept that there are real problems out there. Try to get the misbeliever to think of problems with his or her worldview or contradictions that appear if he examines things more deeply.

This book is fascinating and useful, but I think Ariely should add a couple of chapters to go beyond the perspectives of psychology and behavioral economics. Politics and economics that needs to be stirred into the mix with psychology to get better understanding of how part of America went so crazy. And, I think trying to be even-handed in reporting is part of what got crazy Trump lies accepted rather than called out as nonsense. Ariely could come down harder on the Americans with guns who are ready to end democracy based on false beliefs.

First, politics and economics. I’ve read a series of books that talk about purposeful campaigns to sell a right-wing agenda. *Invisible Hands,* by Kim Phillips-Fein, provides a history of efforts to reverse the New Deal that began in 1934. The Goldwater campaign failed, but eventually, GE’s spokesman Ronald Reagan did begin cutting taxes on the rich, deregulating, and marketing distrust of “gummint” as he called it. *Merchants of Doubt* by Oreskes and Conway, explores science denial beginning with tobacco companies in the 1950s (the famous “our product is doubt” memo) through to climate science denial funded by the Koch donor network.

It is important to note that since the truth threatened profits, companies chose to lie. Jane Mayer’s, *Dark Money,* focusses on the Koch patient campaign to educate the public into disbelief in both science and government. Ann Nelson’s, *Shadow Network*, expands the reporting to also include neo-conservative and Christian political propaganda. Nancy Maclean’s *Democracy in Chains* adds the “public choice theory” intellectual underpinnings of policies to aid the wealthy and hamstring government.

With much of the public educated to believe we can’t trust politicians, the Russian cyber attacks on the Democratic Party did make a credible conspiracy to elect Donald Trump. Without the hacked emails, the bots putting millions of lies into swing states, I doubt we would have seen the revival of racism and the polarization that has afflicted American politics. Putin succeeded in an unrecognized attack on democracy in the United States.

The Cold War is back and is already a hot war. Most of us doubted Putin would be so crazy as to invade Ukraine but he did. The next war, with China when they invade Taiwan, seems likely to be lost by the U.S.A. Where that will leave the world isn’t clear, but probably in a worse place with much violent conflict, poverty, and a diminished U.S.A.

My point is that most of the conspiracy theories believed by those of us on the left are not as imbecilic as some of the anti-vax, climate denial, Democrats are pedophile theories of the right. And, that there is a heavy thumb on the scale of corporate and right-wing billionaire money pushing American public opinion towards folly. We were taught these beliefs about government not being able to solve problems and climate denial by self-interested people with a lot of money and very big megaphones.

A third element Ariely mentions but does not explain is a rational effort to make money by inventing misinformation. The algorithms invented to “monetize” social media, are designed to reward outrageous claims. Plain vanilla news does not get as many clicks as a story about cat-litter boxes for kids who identify as cats. It doesn’t have to be true to make money, in fact, it makes more money if it is an outrageous lie.

So, there is rationality and self-interest in the efforts to make Americans crazy. Right wing politics wanted to confuse people about climate change and other issues so politicians could be elected who wouldn’t threaten oil company profits or raise taxes on billionaires. The Russians (and maybe Chinese, Iranians, North Koreans) use cyberwar attacks to weaken America. They succeeded brilliantly by helping elect an idiot who split the country and made us almost ungovernable. And we need to reverse the social media algorithms that made irresponsible, greedy people some of the richest in the world, at a cost of leading many vulnerable people into a sick world of conspiracy theories.