

From censor to conspiracy theorist: Zeynep Tufekci promotes the Wuhan Lab lie

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On Friday, a commentary by Zeynep Tufekci appeared in the *New York Times* upholding the viability of the Wuhan Lab conspiracy theory for the origins of coronavirus.

The claim that COVID-19 is caused by a man-made virus was rejected as “extremely unlikely” by the World Health Organization’s report on the origins of the disease, and it is regarded as a conspiracy theory by the world’s leading experts on the origins of infectious diseases.

The claim that coronavirus was released from the Wuhan Institute of Virology has been promoted by the fascistic former US president Donald Trump, who said this weekend “it comes out of the lab.” US President Joe Biden has falsely claimed that the “lab leak” conspiracy theory is as likely as the claim by scientists that coronavirus has emerged naturally, and has called on the US intelligence agencies to determine whether it was released “from a laboratory accident.”

The publication of Tufekci’s report follows the discrediting of two leading advocates of the conspiracy theory.

In a widely cited June 1 article, the *World Socialist Web Site* brought attention to the fact that Michael R. Gordon, whose *Wall Street Journal* article led every major US newspaper to declare the lab leak theory “credible,” was the co-author with Judith Miller of the September 8, 2002, article in the *Times* falsely asserting that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was seeking to build a nuclear weapon.

On June 6, the *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to the fact that Nicholas Wade, cited by the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* as an authority on the lab-leak theory, is a serial falsifier and advocate of racist pseudo-science.

Since the publication of these articles, neither Wade nor Gordon has been cited by name in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or *Wall Street Journal* in connection to the “Wuhan lab” theory.

Now in their place has stepped Zeynep Tufekci, a “Techno-sociologist,” to attempt to salvage the discredited lab-leak theory pioneered by Trump’s fascistic counselor Steve Bannon and a number of Chinese multimillionaire exiles.

Claiming that the 1977 flu pandemic was caused by scientific research, Tufekci writes, “For the first time, science itself seemed to have caused a pandemic while trying to prepare for it.”

She draws similar conclusions for the COVID-19 pandemic, writing, “Now, for the second time in 50 years, there are questions about whether we are dealing with a pandemic caused by scientific research.”

Tufekci’s column is an example of what in the world of accounting is referred to as money laundering. Tufekci takes Wade’s arguments and repackages them without citation. She repeatedly makes the same arguments as Wade, and even links the same primary sources, all without attribution to Wade himself.

Two examples will suffice. In his oft-quoted article in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Wade sought to give research by two of the world’s leading experts in dangerous infectious diseases—Ralph S. Baric and Shi Zhengli—a sinister coloration.

Wade writes:

Shi then teamed up with Ralph S. Baric, an eminent coronavirus researcher at the University of North Carolina. Their work focused on enhancing the ability of bat viruses to attack humans so as to “examine the emergence potential (that is, the potential to infect humans) of circulating bat CoVs [coronaviruses].” **In pursuit of this aim, in November 2015 they created a novel virus by taking the backbone of the SARS1 virus and replacing its spike protein with one from a bat virus (known as SHC014-CoV). This manufactured virus was able to infect the cells of the human airway, at least when tested against a lab culture of such cells.**

The SHC014-CoV/SARS1 virus is known as a chimera because its genome contains genetic material from two strains of virus.

Tufekci repeats this narrative almost verbatim, even citing the same 2015 *Nature* article as Wade:

In an article in *Nature Medicine* in 2015, researchers from two of the major coronavirus laboratories in the world—Dr. Shi; Ralph Baric, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and others—wrote that they had bioengineered a coronavirus. The work was carried out in Dr. Baric’s laboratory at U.N.C. **They took a spike protein, the “key” that coronaviruses use to unlock and infect cells, from a horseshoe bat virus and combined it with a human SARS virus adapted for mice.** They reported that this “chimeric” virus could infect human cells, suggesting some bat viruses may be “capable of infecting humans without mutation or adaptation.”

In another instance, Wade cites an addendum to an article in *Nature* by Shi Zhengli, which he argues implies some sort of nefarious cover-up by the researcher.

The bat coronaviruses of the Yunnan caves can infect people directly. **In April 2012 six miners clearing bat guano from the Mojiang mine** contracted severe pneumonia with COVID-19-like symptoms and **three eventually died.** A virus isolated from the Mojiang mine, called RaTG13, is still the closest known relative of SARS2. Much mystery surrounds the origin, reporting and strangely low affinity of RaTG13 for bat cells, as well as the nature of 8 similar viruses that Shi reports she collected at the

same time but has not yet published despite their great relevance to the ancestry of SARS2.

Tufekci not only borrows Wade's narrative, but cites the same obscure two-paragraph addendum published in *Nature* on November 17, 2020:

Suspicious internet sleuths combed through genomic databases and found that RaTG13 was an exact match for a bat coronavirus called 4991 retrieved from a cave implicated in an unexplained outbreak of pneumonia in 2012 among miners who **collected bat guano from a mine in Yunnan. Three of the six miners died.**

The article likewise borrowed many arguments by Katherine Eban of *Vanity Fair* without citation, including comparing some biosearch facilities to American dentists' offices. Tufekci later apologized to Eban on Twitter, claiming unconvincingly that "we didn't use your piece," but nevertheless inserted a link to Eban's report.

Although Eban's article is less directly derivative of Wade's article than that of Tufekci, it directly cites Wade and links to his writings, also noting his "controversial" writings on racism.

Why does Tufekci not cite Wade? The central purpose of her article is to launder the pseudo-scientific arguments of Nicholas Wade and make them once again suitable for citation without having to explain away the fact that Wade is a notorious liar and racist. She appropriates the arguments made by Wade, all the while claiming that she, unlike Wade, remains open-minded.

Even as she claims her narrative "doesn't fit into 'camps' around the 'origin' question," she constructs a narrative that points every finger at scientists and China. For example:

While the Chinese government's obstruction may keep us from knowing for sure whether the virus, SARS-CoV-2, came from the wild directly or through a lab in Wuhan or if genetic experimentation was involved, what we know already is troubling.

Years of research on the dangers of coronaviruses, and the broader history of lab accidents and errors around the world, provided scientists with plenty of reasons to proceed with caution as they investigated this class of pathogens. But troubling safety practices persisted.

The central argument made by Tufekci's piece is that there are two "theories" of the origins of COVID-19, both of which are approximately equally likely. This is not true. While every pandemic known to man has been shown to have a zoonotic origin, no one has ever been proven to have died from a genetically engineered disease. As Dan Samorodnitsky of *Massive Science* wrote:

One hypothesis requires a colossal cover-up and the silent, unswerving, leak-proof compliance of a vast network of scientists, civilians, and government officials for over a year. The other requires only for biology to behave as it always has, for a family of viruses that have done this before to do it again. The zoonotic spillover hypothesis is simple and explains everything. It's scientific malpractice to pretend that one idea is equally as meritorious as the other. The lab-leak hypothesis is a scientific *deus ex machina*, a narrative shortcut that points a finger at a

specific set of bad actors. I would be embarrassed to stand up in front of a room of scientists, lay out both hypotheses, and then pretend that one isn't clearly, obviously better than the other.

The condemnation of Nicholas Wade's 2014 book in an earlier review in the *New York Times* applies just as well for Tufekci: "he does this sort of thing repeatedly: He constantly gathers up long shots, speculations and spurious claims, then declares they add up to substantiate his case."

For instance, Tufekci categorically declares, "The 1977 pandemic was tied to research activities," then links to an article that bluntly states, "there is no hard evidence available" to substantiate this essentially speculative claim.

In other words, for Tufekci, as for Wade, the fact that something *might* have happened is a substantive argument for the fact that it *did* happen.

Like Wade, Tufekci operates by negating the so-called Sagan Standard, that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."

She makes an extraordinary claim—that COVID-19 is likely to be the first man-made pandemic in history—and offers up only speculation in lieu of evidence—that a virus could potentially have been made in a lab, that it could have potentially been released, that the release could have been covered up by lab workers, government officials at the local, state and national level, as well as in a conspiracy encompassing the United Nations and every leading expert in infectious diseases.

In other words, Zeynep Tufekci is a conspiracy theorist.

This fact is particularly significant given her background and role as a leading advocate of the censorship of the Internet by technology companies.

In 2016, she repeated critical arguments in the US efforts to prosecute journalist Julian Assange for exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan that contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

"WikiLeaks Isn't Whistleblowing," she wrote.

She called the Nobel Peace Prize-nominated journalist, the recipient of the Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism, and Amnesty International UK Media Award a "hacker," and called his publishing activities "a form of censorship," a distortion of Orwellian dimensions.

This is all hogwash. As Nils Melzer, United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, made clear:

Since 2010, when Wikileaks started publishing evidence of war crimes and torture committed by US forces, we have seen a sustained and concerted effort by several States towards getting Mr. Assange extradited to the United States for prosecution, raising serious concern over the criminalisation of investigative journalism in violation of both the US Constitution and international human rights law.

From merely cheering on the persecution of journalists by the US government, Tufekci went on to actively call for censorship. In 2018, concretizing ideas she had been advancing for years, Tufekci wrote a commentary published by the *Times* on March 10, 2018, headlined "YouTube, the Great Radicalizer."

She claimed that by "serving us what we want," Google was helping to propagate "conspiracy theories."

She demanded that Google stop showing videos of a "leftish conspiratorial cast," and condemned it for promoting "far-left videos." The solution, Tufekci argued, was for Google to alter its algorithms to

stop showing people “what we want,” and instead show something else.

As with her cheering the persecution of Julian Assange, Tufekci was justifying what was already underway. In April 2017, Google implemented a change to its algorithm, termed Project Owl, that slashed search traffic to left-wing, anti-war and socialist sites.

When the *World Socialist Web Site* published an open letter to Google demanding that it end its censorship of socialist, progressive and anti-war publications, the company made no response. But in 2020, asked by Republican Senator Mike Lee to “name for me one high profile person or entity from a liberal ideology who you have censored,” Google CEO Sundar Pichai named the “World Socialist Review [sic], which is a left-leaning publication.”

Both Tufekci’s advocacy of Internet censorship and Google’s actions were sold to the public as necessary to combat “unsupported conspiracy theories,” in the words of Google executive Ben Gomes. Both Tufekci and Google argued that an epidemic of “fake news” was undermining the ability of experts—such as scientists and historians—to help the public see and understand the truth.

Tufekci’s advocacy of a right-wing conspiracy theory makes clear that this justification for censorship was always a hollow pretext. The censors were concerned not with telling the public the truth, but with ensuring that the public could only know the version of the truth favored by the US government.

In defiance of public health experts, the censorship advocate Tufekci is promoting the right-wing conspiracy theory that “research activities have sparked a pandemic.” She is, in other words, taking part in an insurrection against scientific authority.

The fact is that censorship against the left never had anything to do with defending historical truth and the influence of scientists or historians. It is about ensuring that war propaganda goes unchallenged.

There is a common thread connecting Tufekci’s condemnation of Julian Assange, her calls for Internet censorship against left-wing, socialist and anti-war viewpoints, and her promotion of a right-wing conspiracy theory aimed at providing a pretext for conflict with China.

The story of Zeynep Tufekci shows that propaganda and censorship are two sides of the same coin.



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