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2005–2006

From “Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed” #60, Fall/Winter
2005–05, Vol. 23, No. 2.

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Contents

- The Mythic Appeal of Democracy 3
- The Mythic Appeal of Conspiracy 4
- What's New in Conspiratology 4
- Realities of Democracy 5
- Investigation and Exposure; The Myth of Liberalism 7
- Anarchism and Conspiracy 9
- The Realities and Irrelevance of Conspiracy 11

The Mythic Appeal of Democracy

A myth isn't a lie-it is a story told by people with a particular outlook to others with a similar outlook. It can contain truth and falsehood in varying mixtures and ratios, but the important thing is that it makes sense to its audience.

According to the believers in Democracy (*rule of the people* — however “the people” is defined and narrowed to exclude particular segments from participation in government), it is a system of decision-making that enables the rule of the wisest and most capable and skillful, regardless of hereditary class privilege; this is its republican (anti-monarchist) heritage. Democrats (especially those who identify with the tradition of Liberalism) believe that majority rule provides more voice in decision-making for more people. They believe that more representation means more fairness, that a more informed voting base increases the wisdom of representatives, which furthers the responsiveness and fairness of said representatives. For democrats, information is power. These are some of the myths of Democracy and they are tirelessly promoted by the State through public school indoctrination and fanciful media images.

The reality, though, is a bit different. Most democrats (who rule, rather than those who only aspire to rule) know that democracy is fragile and as easy to manipulate as any other style of government. They operate under the assumption that “the people” will always be unprepared to rule themselves, and therefore those who are the most wise and ethical have the paternalistic responsibility-nay, *duty* — to take upon themselves the heavy elitist burden to govern the rest of us. Duplicity is integral to democratic government (the less apologetically dictatorial forms we will leave out of the current discussion, but the parallels should be obvious); most people who live under democratic rulers don't like to be reminded that they are incompetent (and yet the unprepared and immature people are magically transformed into fully informed, rational agents when it comes time to choose their representatives).

The Mythic Appeal of Conspiracy

A political conspiracy is a self-selecting group of people who get together privately in order to plan and implement a particular agenda with the goal of increasing power and social control. I take it for granted that all kinds of political conspiracies exist; some might just prefer to refer to these conspiracies as skirmishes in the class war, and I wouldn't disagree. The term "conspiracy theory," however, is a derisive dismissal of any possibility that private or clandestine agendas could operate (semi-)publicly in a democracy, and for that reason the term is useless and obnoxious; those who invoke it clearly wish to equate it with *fantasy* or *falsehood* despite all evidence to the contrary. One of the greatest of unintentional (or perhaps not!) ironies occurs when obvious conspirators (like some of the current crop: Bush, Cheney, Kissinger, etc.) pooh-pooh any and all counter-narratives as "conspiracy theories."

Conspiracy theories work the same way as other myths, and (for their adherents at least) have supplanted the otherwise dominant democratic myths of American culture. But because I am unhappy with the way the term "conspiracy theory" is used, I have decided to replace it with a new term to describe how people think about and analyze these conspiracies: Conspiratology; the study and exposure of conspiracies and their respective conspirators.

What's New in Conspiratology

A shift has occurred in American conspiracy lore in the past several decades. From the time of the founding of the United States until the Watergate scandal, conspiratologists were, almost to a person, politically reactionary: they suspected of subversion anyone with questionable or foreign loyalties, socialists of all stripes trying to undermine American Free Enterprise Capitalism, liberals and other do-gooders trying to undermine supposedly natural hi-

edgement that this state of affairs is just business as usual was already imbedded in English by the late 18th century in the term *byzantine*: an intricate and surreptitious manner of operating. This is how all bureaucracies and states, dictatorial or democratic, function. Finding and exposing The Culprits is unnecessary; we already know who's responsible.

erarchies. In other words they considered anyone with dissident views to be an outside agitator, whose ideas just weren't American, or American enough. The fault for the failure of what would otherwise be the smooth, conflict-free functions of democratic government lies with unseen (or partially seen) sinister forces bent on the destruction of democratic values. These days, the usual right-wing conspiratologists have found many commonalities with their left-wing contemporaries; the main issues now include shadowy (undemocratic) government operations mixed in with the vagaries of national (and popular) sovereignty.

The theme that connects conspiratologists is that the social/political/economic order would be just, proper, and natural if only some secretive self-selecting powerful/power-hungry elite hadn't ruined the original order. The elevation of the *status quo ante* into an recapturable ideal (whether that ideal is based more or less on the facts of relative privilege under threat, or the self-serving myths of some segment of a group that feels threatened) is the foundation of all Reaction, and that's the main reason reactionaries have been (until recently) the driving force behind Conspiratology. It has only been with the unquestioned ascendancy of the less plebian right wing to governmental and bureaucratic power in the us that similar arguments have found adherents on the liberal left.

Realities of Democracy

American government has always relied on a semi-hereditary ruling class made up of men from the overlapping realms of the military and intelligence industries, large corporations/landowners and legal firms, energy companies, and ordinary gangsters. Most of those who wield real influence and power in Washington DC are never elected; instead they are appointed to cabinet positions (the current best example being Karl Rove). The constant recycling and reshuffling of unelected business and government executives (some

in the current administration have careers dating back two or three decades) into these positions of power maintains the consistency of government regardless of whichever figurehead sits in the Oval Office. This is not the result of some kind of aberration or betrayal of democracy — it is exactly what a republican form of government requires for continuity.

Secrecy, or the division of labor based on access to information, is a cornerstone of all government, all bureaucracy. The most important function of bureaucracy is self-preservation and the maintenance of hierarchy; restriction of knowledge is the best and most effective guarantee for this, and just as the smooth running of the economy is a seemingly self-perpetuating cycle of buying and selling (its public face), the smooth running of a bureaucracy is based on the self-perpetuating cycle of knowledge and secrecy (mostly taking place in private). Those who believe that the economy is run by the Invisible Hand of the Free Market are as deluded as those who believe that bureaucracies are (or can be made to be) transparent, flexible, and subject to change. Not to be too Marx ist, but the class interests (e.g. increased power and wealth) of those who rule are too important for them to leave such things to chance. Democracy merely offers a broader range of cosmetic options compared to other forms of government.

Then there is the secrecy necessary for diplomacy and espionage, not to mention war. The obsession with secrecy as a standard operating procedure for maintaining government control showed up in anarchist history in a particularly tragic manner. During the Spanish Revolution, the telecommunications industry in Barcelona was collectivized and operated by a joint committee of CNT¹ and the UGT.² This allowed revolutionaries to be fully informed about the conversations and schemes of Republican politicians, a situation

¹ *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (National Confederation of Labor), the anarcho-syndicalist industrial union.

² *Union General de Trabajadores* (General Union of Workers), the trade union affiliated with the Socialist Party.

The Realities and Irrelevance of Conspiracy

Conspiratology has looked so irrelevant to anarchists for the most part because we already know that it doesn't matter who the conspirators are, or to which part of which conspiracy they are loyal; institutional-ized (hierarchical and bureaucratic) power remains intact regardless of how the state operates or who governs. Exposing their behind-the-scenes shenanigans is never enough to stop their projects for increased social control; information is not power, and there are too many competing conspiracies to map out. And that's how all rulers like it, because trying to get a coherent understanding of all of the competing and overlapping machinations and plots becomes an overload on one's critical abilities, and at a certain point the conspiratologist's brain either short-circuits or shuts down. Of course this is precisely the process the conspirators foster with their false leads, dead-ends, sleights of hand, shell games, and unbelievable denials; for every partially true conspiracy that is semi-exposed (whether by the conspirators or the conspiratologists), there are probably two or three (or more) fully true semi-covert conspiracies that continue un(der)noticed. The more interconnected the schemes outlined and drawn by conspiratologists, the less likely it is that non-conspiratologists will pay attention to them.

Are there extraterrestrials operating UFOs? Are the close business (and therefore political) connections between the Bush family and the Saudi ruling families undermining us national sovereignty? Did segments of the us government assassinate John F. Kennedy as part of a right-wing coup? Was the latest part of that coup the us government engineering of the attacks of 9/11? The answers (if there are any that would fully satisfy the dedicated conspiratologist) to these questions are ultimately a distraction. The acknowl-

capitalists. The state, as always, remains a neutral arbiter of sociopolitical conflict in the Marxist universe.

despite what must be the most intensive investigations ever by the coordinated intelligence services of the major powers.⁶

If one believes that governments and their various secret intelligence services are really interested in finding and eliminating enemies — instead of constantly (re)inventing them and manipulating them⁷ — then such a conclusion might make some kind of sense. Yet with the disturbing questions concerning the attack on the Pentagon⁸ and the collapse of WTC Building Seven,⁹ how can any critical thinker not believe that at least part of some of these intelligence services are involved in helping to confuse the supposed investigation? How do we reconcile this kind of coincidence theory with a class analysis? Even a simple-minded Stalinist like Michael Parenti is sophisticated enough to understand that this wishful thinking is absurd, and dares to call those who coordinate their agendas (privately and publicly) *conspirators*.¹⁰

⁶ Noam Chomsky, *Pirate and Emperors, Old and New; International Terrorism in the Real World. New Edition* (South End Press, Cambridge 2002); page 145. My emphasis.

⁷ See Gianfranco Sanguinetti's *On Terrorism and the State; The Theory and Practice of Terrorism Divulged for the First Time* (BM Chronos, London 1982) for his analysis of how the Italian state, through its secret services, effectively controlled the Red Brigades; his point is not specific to the Italian context.

⁸ Including: Where's the huge hole expected if a Boeing 757 had crashed into the side of the building? Where are the missing crucial minutes of security videos?

⁹ Including: How did such an insignificant fire in only one part of the building precipitate its total collapse, despite no other steel and concrete building — apart from WTC 1 and 2 of course — ever collapsing from a structural fire? Was it merely an innocent coincidence that the central emergency command post for the city of New York happened to be located in Building 7?

¹⁰ Parenti's problem is that he refuses to take that analysis into the realm of politics as usual. He really seems to believe that the governors of the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, and contemporary Cuba (among others) cannot possibly engage in similar operations — simply because they were/are not

these professional bureaucrats couldn't tolerate for long. On May 3, 1937, after months of having their calls overheard and sometimes disconnected, the forces of law and order had had enough. The pretext for the storming of the Telephone Exchange led by the Stalinist Chief of Police was this lack of secrecy.³ In the words of a Catalan Stalinist:

It was high time such a step was taken. The CNT listened in to all the conversations between the central government, the Generalitat [the semi-autonomous Catalan government] and abroad. That couldn't be allowed to continue. We had tried to get a member on to the central committee to stop the listening in. So it was decided to take more energetic measures. Of course, had the PSUC [the Catalan Communist Party] been in a position to listen in to telephone conversations it would have done so also. The party always wanted to be well-informed...⁴

Investigation and Exposure; The Myth of Liberalism

The opposite of this kind of secrecy is supposed to be total information. But in any political system that strives for total control, secrecy and information are poles of a false dichotomy; all rulers understand that most information is already biased, originating and disseminated from where they already have enormous influence and power, like think tanks, mainstream media, scientific research institutions, and intelligence agencies (please indulge my avoidance of the obvious overlaps among these sources). The Marketplace of Ideas can withstand any and all challenges — disinfor-

³ This action precipitated the May Days, during which the Stalinists and Catalan Nationalists—and most horrifically, some “influential militants” from the CNT — definitively smashed the revolutionary momentum of the previous ten months.

⁴ Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain* (Pantheon Books, New York 1979); pp 377–8.

mation and biased reporting, scandalous insinuations, and outright lies are merely another pile of data to sift through in a search for some kind of overarching Truth. The glut of disinfotainment turns facts into a kind of white noise, which causes just about everything to be ignored and/or forgotten.

Even if there were some way to get a handle on an elusive Truth,⁵ is the exposure of a conspiracy enough to curtail it — let alone thwart it? While embarrassment and guilt can be powerful motivators for those beholden to the ideals of decency, fair play, and justice, it is equally important to remember that bureaucrats and hierarchs hardly ever play by rules that would put them at a disadvantage. The first rule for those gangsters is hierarchical self-preservation, and honor and honesty have little to offer in that realm however much they might exploit the appearance of these characteristics. The irony of course is that, in a democracy, decency, honesty, and fairness are promoted as the primary motivations of those who would rule. Even better is the slogan on the Seal of the CIA: “the Truth shall set you free.” Statist self-parody doesn’t get much more delicious than that.

The classical Liberal idea is that information equals power, or information equals freedom. From this we get the silly political tactic of “speaking truth to power” as if “power” were some creature with a conscience, and/or a sense of guilt. The chanting of “Shame, Shame” at demonstrations when the cops rough up lawbreakers or when a politician shows his face is the result of this kind of mythological thinking. The idea that exposure and/or embarrassment is enough to get those in power to alter their policies is a legacy of the myth surrounding Gandhi (especially the film version), who supposedly single-handedly embarrassed the British Empire enough to get them to grant independence to India. This pacifist and lib-

⁵ In the realm of conspiratology, some Big Questions that demand answers are: Was what crashed at Roswell really was an extraterrestrial spacecraft? Did a CIA/Mafia/Anti-Castro hit squad really kill Kennedy? Did high-ranking officials in the Bush Administration really plan and execute the attacks of 9/11?

eral nonsense continues to have a bad influence on most anarchoid activists, evidenced by their calls for mass mobilizations: more numbers equals more influence, equals more responsiveness from representatives.

They have assimilated many democratic myths.

Anarchism and Conspiracy

In the realm of domestic and international statecraft and business, we can either believe in class-based plans or we can believe in accidents and coincidences that just happen to coincide and converge with the class interests of those with wealth and power. Anarchists and other radicals throughout history (except more recently it seems, at least in the us) have taken it as a given that politicians, capitalists, cops, and spies (obviously these functions are not discrete) lie as a matter of course, get together out of public scrutiny to plan and execute their agendas, and use disinformation and deceitful propaganda to further those agendas by confusing and destabilizing those they know are their enemies. Is that not conspiracy?

Chomsky, as a notable example, promotes coincidence precisely because he believes that imminent critique of government affairs is the most powerful means to expose it, and that by exposing it, he can help generate the requisite public indignation and/or outrage to get people to do something about it (what that might be remains vague). In order for him to engage in such imminent critique, he must take the politicians at their (public) word and self-image, a rather strange perspective for any radical. This lack of depth leads him to some rather bizarre (for a person supposedly interested in promoting anarchist ideas) conclusions, such as this one:

I will assume [the attacks of September 11th] to be [the work] of Osama Bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network. There has been a prima facie case from the outset, though little credible evidence has been produced