

Conspiracies and Popular Fears

When people talk about conspiracies in general terms these days they usually have in mind a phenomenon known as the “conspiracy theory”. This is a strange one, because we all have a fair idea of what “conspiracy” means, and we all know what “theory” means. It is the casual association of the two ideas, which is confusing, and often, radically misleading.

Unlike the meanings of the word “socialist” or “communist” which we’ve been discussing during the last couple of seminars, “conspiracy” presents few formal *definitional* difficulties. It is a combination of people for an unlawful or reprehensible purpose; it is an agreement to combine in order to plot. To “Conspire” is to combine secretly for an unlawful or reprehensible purpose, especially treason, murder, or sedition; it is to agree secretly.

This much is clear.

In a similar manner, the word “theory” presents few difficulties. Theories consist of propositions, which are, in principle, verifiable. A theory consists in a series or related hypotheses, which may be proved, or falsified, by a process of examination and experiment.

From this it will be readily seen that the common paring of “conspiracy” and “theory” in the phrase “conspiracy theories” radically departs from the generally accepted idea of a theory.

For example, a conspiracy theorist might propose that I come from a race of lizard men, from a galaxy far, far, away. This suspicion might arise from a number of alien characteristics which I from time to time exhibit, but which I am generally able to camouflage or conceal. A conspiracy “theorist” would then pile up a series of unanswered questions concerning my distinctly alien or sinister tendencies, which all point towards the conclusion that I am indeed a lizard man from far, far, away.

However, these suspicions and propositions would not constitute a theory, because none of the propositions made by our conspiracy ‘theorist’, propositions generally framed in a series of unanswered questions posed by the “theorist”, are capable of being proved or falsified. Indeed, their non-falsifiability is built into the *faux* or fake theory by the assertion that lizard men in general come from such an advanced society, possessing such advanced technology, that they are able to ape *being human* so well, it is impossible to tell them apart from the real thing.

So, there we have it. Most popular conspiracy ‘theories’ floating around on the Internet, and in our society more generally, have this characteristic. They are composed of a series of unverifiable questions, which, by definition, cannot be answered, because the conspirators – the Jewish Lobby, the Free Masons, the CIA, the shadowy forces which really run our society – are so powerful, and/or clever, that they will always be able to defy verification.

It becomes clear, the more of these so-called theories, that one looks at that, whatever else they are, they are not “theories” because, they are conceived in such a way that none of the propositions, of which they are composed, is susceptible of proof or disproof. They are not composed of potentially verifiable hypotheses, but of a tissue of unanswerable questions.

[Where’s Obama’s birth certificate?
Oh, here it is!
Ah, but how do we know it isn’t a forgery?]

This is not to say, of course, that conspiracies do not exist. They most definitely do. But it does indicate the care that must be taken when proposing that a conspiracy either has occurred, or continues to be in progress, or when we suspect that a conspiracy might be in progress. But before we go on to look at some conspiracies I want us to think about why this phenomenon of the fake or *faux* conspiracy has become so ubiquitous – so ever-present in our political culture.

I think that it has to do with the role of publicity and the lack of publicity in the exercise of political power.

Before the emergence of capitalism, power was routinely exercised *away from the public gaze*. In a sense the “public” as we conceive of it today did not exist. Very small elites of priests, landlords, princes, or royal personages, exercised political power. They discussed matters amongst themselves and made their plans without regard to the great mass of the population who were not, except in times of peasant rebellions or *jacqueries*, considered to be in any sense part of the polity. Before the emergence of capitalism the great mass of human beings were simply not considered to be worthy of (or capable of) participation in discussions concerning the management of the affairs of religion or the state.

From the sixth century (Common Era) until the Council of Trent¹ in the middle of the sixteenth century the altars of Christian churches were screened from the view of the

¹ The nineteenth ecumenical council opened at Trent on 13 December 1545, and closed there on

congregation in the nave of the church or cathedral by curtains and screens made of wood, stone, or marble. The ordinary people were not allowed to see the mass being performed – the miracle of the mass – the moment when the bread and wine is transformed into the body and blood of Christ – was performed out of sight of the general population. The singing or chanting, the smell of the holy smoke, the bells, could be heard by the people in the nave, but they were not allowed to see the ancient rite being performed; this privilege was restricted to the priests and their acolytes.

Given the central role of the church in the management of land and the other affairs of states throughout Europe this private performance of the mass, and the fact that the reading of the Holy Bible was restricted to churchmen, functions as a perfect metaphor for the manner in which temporal power was exercised by aristocrats, princes and royal personages, *behind the screen*, *behind closed doors*, if not entirely in secret.

Even in the great republics of Venice or Florence, the elections, assemblies, or the approval of rulers, and other grand occasional consultations, were restricted to the men of property and their sons. What we would regard as the general public had little or no role in these events, short of their capacity to riot, or to support one elite faction against another.

With the emergence of capitalist relations of production in England and then in North America a literate public began to emerge, which through the course of the eighteenth century evolved into a kind of recognizable public, still largely restricted to *free* men of property, but it was a public which interested itself in the affairs of the state, and by and large refused to believe that the discussion of political affairs should be left in the hands of aristocrats or royal personages. The early insistence by merchants and guild masters, to be consulted upon matters like taxation and war, widened into regular involvement in the discussion of the affairs of the state. Just as the Protestant reformation of the church resulted in a Bible which could be read by all, and even the Roman Catholic mass was opened to the gaze of the general public, so by the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century, very much wider participation and discussion in the affairs of the state became a permanent element in commercial, or capitalist, societies.

In England appeals for universal manhood suffrage date from the 1780s.² The idea that secrecy in government constituted a pernicious danger to the public good,

⁴ December 1563. Its main object was the definitive determination of the doctrines of the Church in answer to the heresies of the Protestants; a further object was the execution of a thorough reform of the inner life of the Church by removing the numerous abuses that had developed in it. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15030c.htm>.

² In 1780 the Westminster Committee called for universal manhood suffrage, annual parliaments, equal electoral districts, secret ballots, the exclusion of placemen, the payment of MPs, and the abolition of

likewise, begins to assume a recognizably modern form. From the late 1790s and into the early nineteenth century Jeremy Bentham began to talk about “sinister interest”.³ What he meant by this was the behavior of landowners and the great landed families in England at the time; he was referring to their secret maneuvers against anything they considered to be against their private interest. They would use, he contended, whatever influence they had *behind closed doors* to violate the public good if it was in the *private* interests.

So, Bentham insisted that there was always a danger that “sinister interests” were acting “in opposition to the *common interest*.”⁴ So the recognition of the need for publicity in the conduct of public affairs, and the rigorous containment and restriction of “sinister interests”, is a key element in the emergence of the general struggle for democracy. It was understood early, that the *justice of the appearance of things* was crucial for the good management of the state. It was understood that only publicity would defeat rumour, only publicity would limit the spreading of pernicious anecdotes, only publicity would dampen suspicion.

So, to recap: The public in our sense do not exist before the emergence capitalism. Before the emergence of commercial or capitalist society the affairs of the church and the state are conducted entirely beyond the gaze of the great mass of the population. The government of princes, bishops, royal personages, and even of republics, was conducted out of earshot and out of sight of the population at large. In such circumstances the idea of conspiracy existed only between, and among princes, or between, wicked persons and the Devil, or between wicked persons consorting to betray or overthrow their lawful masters. The idea of “the public” in our sense did not exist; consequently, the idea of “publicity” as a virtue, or as a desirable aspect of government did not exist.

Our modern predicament in this regard is this, as democracy emerged during the course of the nineteenth century in Britain and North America, as the franchise began to be extended to wider and wider sections of the population, the issue of *justice in the appearance of things*, of the need for *publicity* to defeat what Bentham called the pursuit of “sinister interest” against the “common interest” became a permanent feature of our kind of society.

This has led to everything from the defence of the free press, and free speech, to the paradoxical insistence upon the secrecy of the ballot in order to prevent or diminish the role of the pursuit of “sinister interests” in elections.

the property qualification for MPs. See John Ashton Canon, *Parliamentary Reform 1640 to 1832*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1972. *Passim*.

³ See ‘The Emergence of Sinister Interest’, Chapter 5 of Philip Schofield’s *Utility & Democracy: The Political Thought of Jeremy Bentham*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.111.

Now, manifestly, the affairs of democratic states are only *partially* conducted in public. Despite the clamour for ‘Open Government’ and the existence of various statutes, which establish the right to know what the government is doing, many government departments, and government agencies, continue to conduct their affairs more or less behind closed doors. In the wider economy, under the rubric of the need for commercial secrecy, much of what giant ‘public’ companies and corporations do is also conducted behind closed door. Their justification for this is simple – they have a right to protect “market sensitive” information that may be of use to a competitor.

So, paradoxically, it is the emergence of a literate and informed public, the emergence of an increasingly sophisticated public opinion, which has given rise to the need by the democratic state, and of large ‘public’ companies and corporations, to seek means to keep much of their doings secret, as they simultaneously express their commitment to the democratic virtue of “publicity”. In such circumstances, it is no surprise at all that rumour, the spreading of pernicious anecdotes, and suspicion, should abound.

This is indeed confirmed in the public mind by the actual conspiracies, which we can demonstrate, have been perpetrated in the pursuit of “sinister interests” against the “common good” in the past.

A very interesting example of this involved the pursuit of the “common good” of white people, and of white science, at the expense of black men and women in Tuskegee, Alabama. Between 1932 and 1972, the United States Public Health Service conducted a clinical study into the natural progression of untreated syphilis. They did this by recruiting several hundred poor black sharecroppers (– their social position was something akin to serfs in segregated Alabama –) to the study. All the men had syphilis. However, they were not told that they had the disease, and they were not ever treated for the disease. A state agency conspired against these men, and their sexual partners, for forty years in order to be able to see how syphilis developed without treatment.⁵

[Penicillin]

Other real conspiracies have occurred. One need only think of the Zinoviev Letter, the publication of which brought about the defeat of the first Labour Government in Britain in 1924 to be aware of the political role, which conspiracy can sometimes play.⁶

- GRIGORY ZINOVIEV (CHAIRMAN OF THE COMINTERN)

⁵ Fred D. Gray, *The Tuskegee Syphilis Study: the real story and beyond*, Tuskegee Institute, Montgomery: New South Books, 1998.

⁶ See ‘The Zinoviev Letter’, Historical Papers: Historical Notes, National Archives, at: <http://tna.europarchive.org/20061103003017/http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front/TextOnly?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029395681&to=true>

- Promoting sedition in Britain
- THE LETTER PUBLISHED IN *THE TIMES & DAILY MAIL* FOUR DAYS BEFORE GENERAL ELECTION OF 1924
- FORGED BY ÉMIGRÉ ORGANISATIONS AND USED BY GERMAN INTELLIGENCE AND MI5
- TRADE DEALS WITH RUSSIA
- JOHN ROSS CAMPBELL – *WORKERS' WEEKLY*
- POLICY OF THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL

So, it is now perfectly clear that the Red Letter or the Zinoviev Letter was a forgery springing from within anti-Bolshevik émigré groups and was dropped into circulation by British secret service agents in order to destabilise the British Labour government.

Other notable conspiracies:

i) WANSEE CONFERENCE:

- (a) Was there a plan to systematically murder the Jews?
- (b) The minutes of the meeting in 1942⁷

ii) SUEZ 1956: Nasser nationalises the Canal in July 1956

- (a) On October 29, 1956, Israel attacked Egypt.
- (b) The following day Britain and France issued ultimatums to both sides to immediately stop the fighting.
- (c) Americans brought this to a close because they opposed the Anglo-French neo-colonial plans for the region

iii) BAY OF PIGS

April 17, 1961, 1500 members of a Cuban exile force invaded Cuba in order to overthrow the regime of Fidel Castro. They were acting with the explicit approval of President Kennedy and they were funded and assisted by the CIA. Officials within Kennedy's administration within three months of his inauguration had hatched the plot.

iv) EXTRAORDINARY RENDITION

Did it happen: kidnapping and torture? We have few reasons for doubting that this occurred. Because of Guantanamo Bay, and the close relationship between British and American Intelligence services, and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and other states in which torture is known to be widely practiced within prisons, army barracks and police stations. Even without much firm evidence it does not seem

⁷ 'The Wansee Protocol': Minutes of the Meeting held by ministerial secretaries, administrators and police officials of the Third Reich to clarify the fundamental questions relating to the final solution of the Jewish question in Europe, 20 January 1942, available at the University of Pennsylvania: <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Holocaust/wansee-transcript.html>.

implausible to believe intuitively that something of this kind did happen.

We also know that in previous wars prisoners have been held indefinitely, without rights, with hundreds of thousands enslaved and never released – the Japanese prisoners held by the Chinese – German prisoners held by the Soviet Union. Or, the forcible transfer by the British of Ukrainian nationalists and other prisoners of war to Stalin’s tender mercies.

[GERMAN PRISONERS IN 1945 IN RUSSIA, FRANCE, GERMANY & ITALY]⁸

So illegal or arbitrary detention of enemy or unlawful combatants and their subjection to torture, their movement from one jurisdiction to another determined by policy or military exigencies, are historically attested and widespread. Consequently, those seeking to discover or expose extraordinary rendition are not fabricating a *conspiracy theory* – they are demanding the proper investigation of determinate and plausible allegations – there is, as the lawyers say, a *prima facie* case to be answered.

So, there are no shortages of conspiracies within our society. However, in order to understand as well as possible how power is actually exercised it is vitally important to reject the kind of phony conspiracies touted by “conspiracy theorists” precisely because these so-called ‘theories’ damage both the meaning of the word and concept, “theory”, and our understanding of how power is actually exercised within capitalist societies.

Therefore, it is vitally important to employ *Occam’s razor* to all of this. That is, we should tend towards the simplest explanation of any phenomena, until a more complex account appears to be justified, and necessary, for further investigation to be fruitful. This means that we do not need “conspiracy theories” to explain why most decisions within capitalist societies are made by those who own capital. We do not need “conspiracy theories” to explain why “sinister interests” are pursued to the damage of the common good, by government run by, and often actually composed of, people who own substantial amounts of capital. By and large power is exercised in our kind of society, for and on behalf of the defence of private property, for and on behalf of the owners of private property.

⁸ Giles MacDonogh, *After the Reich: From the Liberation of Vienna to the Berlin Airlift*, London: John Murray, 2007, *passim*; see particularly, ‘Where Are Our Men?’ pp.392-428.

Consequently, chasing after bizarre accounts of conspiracies, which in their very composition can never be proved or disproved, is a serious waste of time. It also always carries with it the danger of creating or perpetuating myths and lies concerning the doings of those who belong to particular ethnic or religious groups. If a conspiracy is plausible, then let's set out to prove it, or disprove it. If it is not, let's get on with attempting to understand in an increasingly sophisticated manner how power is exercised within bourgeois democratic states.