
Making Sense of Conspiracy Theories

Defining the Terms "Conspiracy" and "Conspiracy Theory"

At first sight it should be fairly easy to define the terms "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory." A straightforward definition of a conspiracy is when a small group of powerful people combine together in secret to plan and carry out an illegal or improper action, particularly one that alters the course of events. But the term is often used fairly loosely. We might wonder, for example, whether the activities of intelligence agencies involved in spying and carrying out covert missions count as conspiracies by this definition. They are by their very nature plotted in secret, and they are indeed intended to alter the shape of history, but we might wonder if the everyday machinations of, say, CIA agents constitute a conspiracy because they are merely doing their job. Only in some cases is it immediately obvious that their actions are illegal or improper, and hence a conspiracy rather than merely being a covert operation. The problem with making illegality or impropriety part of the definition of a conspiracy is that it depends who is defining what's illegal or not. In the realm of the law it is comparatively straightforward to determine if something is a criminal conspiracy (it is illegal, for example, to engage in the kind of price-fixing that was uncovered in the fine-art auction industry in the 1990s, and hence it would be valid to say that the auction houses engaged in a conspiracy). But in the arena of history, there are no hard-and-fast rules of what is permissible or not. What to one person may look like a conspiracy to

alter the course of events, to others will seem merely the regular dog-eat-dog spectacle of political maneuvering.

The second problem with the term "conspiracy" is that it relies on a fairly strong notion of intention (often referred to as a sense of "agency" in theoretical discussions). A conspiracy is only a conspiracy, we might suppose, if the plotters fully intended to carry out that particular action and were quite aware of the consequences of it. So, for example, we might wonder whether there is a deliberate conspiracy by men to keep women in a subordinate position. It's undeniable that historically women have found themselves thwarted in a variety of social, legal, and political ways, and it's also undeniable that at least some men have actively approved of that situation, but the question remains whether men's vague and perhaps even unspoken desire for supremacy is what has causally resulted in the oppression of women. Does a conspiracy have to involve not just the desire and intention to bring about a certain effect, but the proven fact of a causal connection? In other words, does a conspiracy always have to be conscious, deliberate, and explicitly stated, or can it emerge from the implicit, taken-for-granted assumptions and patterns of thought that slowly accumulate over time and that really do shape history? Most commentators would still insist that if the term "conspiracy" is to have any meaning at all, then it must involve deliberate agency. But some theorists have more recently begun to suggest that certain

states of affairs (for example, sexism and racism) are not merely the result of chance but are the perhaps unintended consequence of a series of attitudes and ways of behaving that together amount to something that *may as well have been* a conspiracy. You don't need to say it out loud for there to be a conspiracy, this theory suggests.

This problem with defining the nature of agency leads us to the even more tricky problem of coming up with a working definition of a conspiracy theory. At the most basic level, a conspiracy theory blames the current, undesirable state of affairs on a concerted conspiracy by a secret group. It is in effect an interpretation of history that claims that things aren't always what they seem, and that things haven't just tumbled out by coincidence in the normal, more-or-less random fashion, but that they have only got like this because someone with evil intentions planned it this way. However, the label "conspiracy theory" usually suggests that the interpretation offered is wrong. In effect the phrase is often not a neutral description of a form of historical analysis, as if it were just another form of historical theory alongside, say, postcolonial theory or feminist theory. Instead it usually carries an implicit accusation: there are undoubtedly conspiracy facts (the suggestion is), but in this case your view is just a conspiracy theory, a misleading speculation, and even wooly-headed thinking that verges on the mentally disturbed. Usually what lies behind the accusation is either a specific criticism that in this particular case the theory is wrong (for example, contrary to some conspiracy theories, President Roosevelt did not know in advance about the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor), or that the view of history put forward by conspiracy theories is always necessarily wrong (history in this view is not the result of a concerted plot but, to cite two popular positions, the fairly random and unpredictable interaction of countless individuals, or the predictable interplay of vast, impersonal structural forces). Looked at the other way, a conspiracy theory that has been proven (for example, that President Nixon and his aides plotted to disrupt the course of justice in the Watergate case) is usually called something else—investigative journalism, or just well-researched historical analysis. Usually no

one claims to believe in a conspiracy theory as such. The people accused of believing in conspiracy theories about the death of President Kennedy, for example, are very insistent that they are assassination researchers and not conspiracy buffs. It's only other people who are conspiracy theorists, the argument goes.

Some historians have come up with more elaborate definitions of conspiracy theory in order to make clear what is so distinctive about it. For example, Richard Hofstadter's classic study (1964) of what he termed the "paranoid style in American politics" recognized that there have indeed been actual conspiracies here or there in U.S. history, but that a conspiracy theorist believes that there is "a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events" (Hofstadter, 29). According to this kind of view, conspiracy theory is more than just the odd speculation about clandestine causes; it is a way of looking at the world and historical events that sees conspiracies as the motor of history (in contrast to other theorists who have argued that, say, economics or ideas are the real engines pushing forward the wheel of history). Other commentators (e.g., Pipes, and Robins and Post) have recently pushed Hofstadter's definition even further, arguing that we need to make a distinction between "petty conspiracies," which merely involve fears about groups secretly scheming to gain local or small-scale advantage, and "world conspiracy theories," which involve warnings about a political takeover by a malign cabal with large-scale or even global aspirations to power. According to this theory, the reason for making the distinction is that only world conspiracy theories are worth studying because they are the kind that often lead to dangerous social and political movements such as Nazism and Stalinism.

These attempts to define what counts as a conspiracy theory are useful in that they draw attention to an important aspect of the phenomenon, particularly in some of its more prominent outbursts in U.S. history (anti-Catholicism in the nineteenth century, for example, took the form of warnings that the pope and his representatives were scheming to bring about worldwide domination of the Church in Rome). They also try to impose

some limits on the meaning of a term that is always threatening to creep far beyond any agreed usage. However, by limiting the definition in advance they are in danger of leaving out some examples of conspiratorial thought that have a lot in common with conspiracy theories. They also downplay what seems to be one of the important functions of conspiracy theory today, namely questioning how much we are in control of our own minds and our own actions through the debate over exactly what is to count as a conspiracy or not. (If a conspiracy theory serves no other purpose, it is often the way that nonprofessional historians try out ideas about the nature of historical change. Trying to decide what term to use to describe a state of affairs that looks just as if there were a conspiracy is part of the function of a conspiracy theory today.) Finally, as helpful as these definitions are in making the loose baggy monster of conspiracy theory more manageable, they also end up rigging the game so as to favor a particular theoretical take on the nature of the phenomenon.

There have certainly always been conspiracies of one kind or another in U.S. history. And there has undoubtedly always been some speculation about the role of secret plotters in that history, even if those speculations don't quite amount to a conspiracy theory according to some of the more restrictive definitions (or aren't necessarily to be condemned, as we shall see below). What is comparatively new, however, is the term "conspiracy theory" itself. The phrase first entered the supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1997, which is an indication of how much a buzzword it has become in recent decades. However, the entry suggests that the first recorded usage of the phrase was in an article in the *American Historical Review* in 1909, although it did not become familiar in academic writing until the 1950s (with the work of Karl Popper), and did not really become common currency until the 1960s. The belated coining of the phrase might be merely a case of historians latching on to a handy short-hand expression for an already well-known, coherent, and recurring phenomenon. It might, however, be the case that coming up with a label for the phenomenon actually

invents the phenomenon itself, in the sense that a new conceptual category turns what otherwise would have been a set of possibly quite diverse ideas into a coherent style of thought.

What's interesting about the phrase now is that the people who are accused (or sometimes *diagnosed*) of being conspiracy theorists are often well aware of the charge, and many an article on the Internet about, say, the New World Order begins with the disclaimer that "I know I'll be accused of being a conspiracy theorist, but . . ." The significance of this self-aware and often self-reflexive discussion of the very phrase used to describe the phenomenon is that it is beginning to change the nature of the phenomenon itself, especially in the realm of popular culture. The 1997 Hollywood blockbuster *Conspiracy Theory* (starring Mel Gibson and Julia Roberts) takes this self-consciousness to an extreme: whereas in the past a film might have merely had the name of a particular conspiracy as its title, in this case it bizarrely uses the generic term as its title. One thing that makes the historical study of conspiracy theories particularly challenging, then, is that determining what constitutes the phenomenon has become part of the phenomenon itself.

The United States and Conspiracy Theory: A Special Relationship?

The United States has long had a fascination with conspiracies. As the entries and the primary source extracts in this encyclopedia make clear, the imagination or the detection of secret plotting has been a recurrent feature of U.S. history, albeit with more prominent outbursts in some periods than others. It's often suggested (not least by commentators outside the United States) that the nation has a particular affinity to conspiratorial thought, that conspiracy theory is a distinctively U.S. phenomenon. There are some good reasons to think that this is the case. It's arguable, for example, that a suspiciousness toward strangers and outsiders (or even just the frightening "wilderness" itself) is a dominant feature of the early Puritan settlers. Some critics have suggested that the Puritan habit of mind that sought signs and symptoms of the work

of the Almighty in tiny, everyday clues was just a short step away from a conspiratorial mentality that tried to read every event for its hidden meaning. In a similar vein, some historians have argued that the nature of the American Revolution has "conditioned Americans to think of resistance to a dark subversive force as the essential ingredient of their national identity" (Davis, 23), a view that is apparent in the catalog of suspicions about the intentions of the British government that are written into the Declaration of Independence itself. It is even plausible to suggest that the fear of sinister enemies, both real and imagined, both internal and external, was one of the most important factors that helped to shape the disparate British colonies into a united state. Another possible reason for the seeming close connection between America and conspiracy theory is America's foundational sense of its unique, divinely ordained destiny, a sense of American exceptionalism that has helped to promote the feeling that any deflection from that manifest destiny must be the result of a concerted plot (by satanic forces in the early years, and by malign political agents in later times). Another version of this argument is that it is Americans' traditional, republican faith in openness and democracy that has led them to be highly suspicious of any political maneuverings that smack of secrecy, elitism, or even of unnecessary involvement of intrusive federal government in the life of free individuals (see Wills). It has even been suggested that lack of a popular socialist tradition in the United States (in comparison with Europe) means that Americans are comparatively less likely to believe that history operates through the impersonal interaction of economic forces and social classes and more likely to believe that history is the product of individual agency, which is sometimes benign and transparent, and at others malign and covert. Finally, some historians have put forward the idea that more recently the United States has become the home of conspiracy theories because so many high-level, prominent conspiracies have been undertaken and uncovered since the 1960s.

On the other hand, it is not difficult to see that the United States does not have a monopoly on

conspiracy theories. Historians (e.g., Pipes, and Robins and Post) have pointed out that although U.S. politics might once have been dominated by the conspiratorial scapegoating of minorities and the alarmist imagination of invasive enemies (particularly in the nineteenth century), more recently conspiracy theory in the United States has been confined to inconsequential political sideshows or even been transformed into a form of entertainment or titillation. We might disagree with the idea that conspiracy theories have gone off the boil in the United States (not least because they seem to have become so publicly prominent), but it is certainly true that other countries have been and still are dangerously attracted to a conspiratorial mindset. Stalinist Russia or the present-day Middle East, for example, are both saturated with the rhetoric of conspiracy and plot. Although there is a danger in studying U.S. history in isolation because it tends to fall too easily into the trap of U.S. exceptionalism, conspiracy theories have undoubtedly played a vital role in U.S. history, and continue to occupy a prominent place in everyday politics and popular culture. But how exactly should we study them, and what theoretical approaches have been brought to bear on the phenomenon?

Refutations

Probably the most straightforward approach to conspiracy theory has been to catalog the error of its ways instead of discussing it as a phenomenon or a symptom. In a series of essays published in the 1940s and 1950s the philosopher Karl Popper sought to refute conspiratorial interpretations of society and history as conceptually misguided. He defined the conspiracy theory of society as "the view that whatever happens in society—including things which as a rule people dislike, such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages—are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or group" (Popper, 341). Popper went on to argue that this view is necessarily false because it is inconceivable that such complex, global events are the result of specific intentions of individuals. This dismissal of conspiracy theory as a flawed understanding of history is based on the revolution in social thought

that began in the nineteenth century with thinkers such as Marx, Darwin, and Freud proposing (in very different ways) that humans are not consciously in control of their own individual or collective destinies but are the subject of large, impersonal historical forces. These views are the mainstay of what we now call the social sciences, and several commentators (e.g., Wood) have suggested that there is now no excuse for anyone to believe in a "personalized" view of history anymore.

This argument is sometimes given a specific, political twist (e.g., Albert). Although those on the left of the political spectrum might be tempted to believe in conspiracy theories (because they seem to name and blame traditional left-wing enemies such as corrupt government officials and corporate insiders for the mess we're in), they should steer well clear of them. The reasoning is that the real agents of history are not individuals (however powerful they may seem) but more abstract institutional structures that transcend any individual intention: only by changing those structures of power that condoned and perhaps even encouraged such activities (rather than merely removing the guilty individuals who abused the system) can there be any hope of social change. In this view, a conspiracy theory that claims to have found the real hidden causes of events (even if they are proven true in some cases) will always in some measure be mistaking or perhaps even mystifying the real underlying causes of events that need to be understood in terms of institutions rather than individuals. Other commentators (e.g., Shermer), however, have not taken up a specific political stance, and have instead railed against the increasingly widespread belief in conspiracy theories as evidence of the dumbing down of the United States. These arguments often proceed from a skeptical, debunking position, and point out the inconsistencies and illogicalities in a variety of popular conspiracy theories.

Paranoid Style

If some writers have tried to show up the flaws in conspiratorial thought, then others have sought to explain its prevalence in U.S. history. Perhaps the

most popular and influential approach has been to view the repeated imagination of conspiracies everywhere as evidence of what the historian Richard Hofstadter termed the "paranoid style in American politics." This approach explains the presence of the rhetoric of conspiracy as a sign of something akin to a collective paranoia at work. It is not usually meant as a strict clinical diagnosis of the conspiracy theorist as delusional, but instead uses the psychological category of paranoia as a way of identifying the social phenomenon and then of explaining some of its features. This theory highlights features of conspiracy belief such as an ever escalating suspiciousness; a sense of persecution; the morbid projection onto the enemy of repressed fantasies that the believer may hold; the apocalyptic fears that a whole way of life is under threat; and the paradoxically comforting and grandiose sense that although a seemingly marginal player on the stage of history, you are in fact the center of attention—albeit as the object of a sinister plot against the group you belong to. According to the proponents of this view, the paranoid style is a prominent and recurring style in U.S. history, from the founding of the republic to the recurrence in the nineteenth century of conspiracy-minded scapegoating and nativism (the belief that the United States belongs to native-born white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and any newcomers from outside that group present a significant threat to the American way of life). The "paranoid style" explanation is at first sight an extremely compelling way to characterize (and condemn) the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories, even if it doesn't fully succeed in explaining them because of the circularity of argument (for what is paranoia, if not a propensity to believe in conspiracy theories?). Its real contribution was in taking this style of thought seriously, and trying to find evidence of it in a wide range of U.S. culture.

This approach became popularized by historians such as Hofstadter and Bernard Bailyn in the 1960s, and can be seen in retrospect as partly a response to the excesses of the McCarthyite anti-communist witch-hunts of the 1950s. Although highlighting the recurrence of the often small-

mindful, racist, and hateful paranoid mentality in U.S. history made for fairly depressing reading, these historians took some comfort from the fact that the repeated outbursts usually seemed to be confined to those on the margins of political power. Later theorists (e.g., Rogin) have challenged this last shred of comfort, arguing that it is not those excluded from the center of power who are paranoid but that the mainstream itself is deeply pathological in its repeated scapegoating of minorities throughout U.S. history. This view in effect says that the irrational fear of subversive enemies is not an occasional disruption of U.S. history, but is the default mode of that history.

In an important article written in 1982, the historian Gordon Wood put forward a more historically limited challenge to the psychohistorical claims that are at the heart of the “paranoid style” theory. He took issue with the idea that vast numbers of Americans, and some of the nation’s most important political leaders, are in some measure mentally disturbed. In particular Wood pointed out that a belief in history as the product of individual agency was understandably very common in the eighteenth century, and it was not illogical at the time to think that any seeming disturbance in the natural course of events was the result of a deliberate and secret scheme. However, Wood goes on to argue that, since the emergence of the social sciences in the later nineteenth century (that itself was a response to the vastly increased complexity of political and economic events in a world slowly becoming globalized), a belief in conspiracy as the engine of history has once again been a sign of poor thinking and perhaps even of the kind of social exclusion that borders on paranoia.

Moral Panics and Scapegoating

An alternative explanation starts from the observation that conspiracy theories in America are usually told not by those on the margins of society but by the (comparatively) powerful *about* those on the margins. This view highlights those moments in American history when already victimized minorities (such as Jewish and Asian immigrants) have become the subject of conspiracy theories that pin

the blame on them for current social woes (such as unemployment). This approach sees conspiracy theory as part of the larger pattern of scapegoating, and focuses usually on right-wing and other antisemitic and racist hate groups.

An important component of this theory is its suggestion that conspiracy theories about blameless victims are often whipped up quite cynically as part of a larger campaign of popular hatred. In this respect the psychology of belief envisaged by this theory is very different from that proposed by the “paranoid style” school. In that model, the believers in conspiracy theory can’t help themselves and are in a sense victims of a style of thought that clouds their judgment, along the lines of succumbing to an epidemic mass hysteria. But the conspiracy-as-scapegoating theory suggests that believers—or at least the leaders of the groups that promote such beliefs—are merely spreading rumors without necessarily believing in them.

A further development of this theory puts forward the idea that sometimes people at the very center of power might create (or perhaps just cynically promote) a popular outburst of demonology in order to further their own political schemes. This view is sometimes known as the elitist theory of moral panics, because it suggests that the elite deliberately fuel moral panics in order to legitimate repressive measures that would otherwise be unacceptable. Like the scapegoating theory, this position has the advantage of not relying on unprovable assertions about the psychological makeup of those inclined to believe in conspiracy theories, and at its best it can offer compelling and historically nuanced accounts of the vested political and economic interests that are really being served by the promotion of conspiracy beliefs. For example, one interpretation of the antisocialist “red scares” of 1919–1920 is that they were not so much a spontaneous outburst of popular paranoia about an imagined threat to U.S. sovereignty as a convenient excuse that was seized upon by the authorities to bring in antilabor legislation that would have otherwise been deemed too repressive. However, with its emphasis on the ruthlessly efficient manipulation of mass belief, it leaves no room for understanding why so many people

come to accept conspiracy theories (are they all just dupes?), or what function those scaremongering stories might fulfill for the people who circulate them. Finally, this position is usually associated with left-leaning interpretations of history, but recently right-wing commentators have adapted it in their allegations that events such as the Oklahoma City bombing and even the attacks of September 11 were in fact carried out by agents of the government in order to soften up the public into accepting antiterrorist measures that these right-wing groups see as curbing individual liberty. As this admittedly extreme example suggests, however, the elitist theory of moral panic contains within it the seeds of a conspiratorial interpretation of history—albeit far more plausible in some cases than others.

The Function of Conspiracy Theories

The approaches outlined so far all start from the assumption that conspiracy theories are false, hence the need for an explanation of why so many people should come to believe in such a distorted view of the world. An alternative approach, however, brackets off the question of whether the particular conspiracy theories are true or false (a distinction that some commentators suggest is becoming far harder to make), and instead investigates what function the conspiracy stories fulfill in the lives of the people and the groups who circulate them. This interpretation is concerned less with developing a theory about the underlying psychology of the “paranoid style” across time than with trying to account for the emergence of a particular belief at a particular historical moment by looking at its purpose rather than its meaning. In this respect it has much in common with the elitist theory of moral panics, but it differs in that it does not see the believers in conspiracy theory as unwitting dupes but as active shapers of theories that help them to make sense of a confusing world. It tends in effect to be a fairly charitable reading of popular beliefs. Where some critics would dismiss conspiracy theories as a failure to understand the complex processes of historical causation, this view argues that conspiracy theory is a kind of pop soci-

ology, a way of making sense of structure and agency in a time when official versions of events and more academic forms of explanation fail to capture the imagination of a disillusioned public.

Some practitioners of this cultural studies approach tune in to what conspiracy believers actually say by closely reading their writings and even by interviewing them. The aim is not so much to establish what the people consciously believe as to find out why, at a symbolic level, these beliefs make some kind of expressive sense at a particular historical moment. So, for example, in Bridget Brown's study of alien abduction narratives (many of which have a conspiratorial twist involving government collusion) she both reads the main texts in the genre and interviews abductees. She draws attention, for example, to the way that abduction narratives often focus on fears about medical experimentation (particularly about sexual fertility), and locates these seemingly bizarre stories within the complex history of the increasing role of technology and unapproachable experts in medicine, and debates about the politics of abortion and other reproduction issues. Other examples (e.g., Knight, Spark) see the resurgence of conspiracy theories about the so-called New World Order and even theories about government collusion with aliens as a way of talking (in a displaced and distorted form) about issues such as globalization, and the loss of control of personal and national economic destiny. At bottom these kinds of densely historical accounts read conspiracy theories as symptomatic of larger fears that circulate through the culture at particular moments of stress. They suggest that even if the stories turn out to be not literally true then they still manage to capture and express—in however bizarre a fashion—a view of the contemporary world that is not without foundation. One effect of this approach is that the range of examples of what counts as a conspiracy theory worthy of the name and worthy of study has begun to expand. The “paranoid style” method was geared toward studying political movements, but some of the more recent studies of conspiracy theory have been interested in everyday popular beliefs that are not explicitly political, and often are manifested in the realm of culture. Some

commentators (e.g., Pipes) have argued that, even if in other countries conspiracy theory is still explicitly political, in the United States it has become thankfully relegated to the cultural realm. In contrast, the cultural studies approach claims that politics is now often carried out in the cultural realm, and so phenomena like conspiracy theories are not merely a sideshow but are part of the real action.

Although most of these cultural studies accounts remain fairly neutral in political terms, some have tried to assess whether conspiracy theories are reactionary or progressive. The traditional view (common to both the paranoid style and moral panic theories) is that conspiracy theories are nearly always bad news: if they're not immediately harmful in their promotion of scapegoating, then they produce a mystified view of the world that prevents people from focusing on what's really wrong with the world. However, with the emergence of a strand of conspiracy culture (since the assassinations of the 1960s and the revelations about the wrongdoings of the government in the 1970s) that seems at first sight to be politically progressive, some commentators have wondered whether conspiracy theories might now in this limited way have become part of a wider populist challenge to the status quo and the "official version" of events. For example, in her study of alien conspiracy theories the political scientist Jodi Dean argues that the proliferation of unsettling, logic-defying abduction narratives works to erode the boundary between the rational and the irrational, and that this blurring of distinctions feeds into the wider populist challenge to what is sometimes known as consensus reality. But other critics (e.g., Crews) have taken issue with such claims, pointing out that there is something disturbing about championing such beliefs as politically useful when in most cases they make the believers miserable. (Brown takes a halfway position, suggesting that although alien abductees find some measure of self-empowerment in telling their stories, at the same time those stories only serve to emphasize their lack of power in the face of nameless conspiring forces.) In his detailed and careful study of this new wave of conspiracy belief, Mark Fenster tackles head-on the

question of its political possibilities (and takes issue with the work of John Fiske in particular). He comes to the conclusion that as much as it might seem to be progressive in the way that it gives a voice to a populist resentment with the authorities (and most of his book is concerned with exploring this possibility), conspiracy theory at the end of the day is putting forward a distorted view of historical causation that ultimately leads people astray from real political engagement.

What these cultural studies approaches have in common is that they see conspiracy theories as being in dialog with their historical context (rather than just an occasional outburst of mass hysteria that is liable to crop up at any time more or less without reason). Coming from the slightly different perspective of anthropology, another related approach sees conspiracy theories as a form of urban legend or rumor. For example, the folklorist Patricia Turner has conducted field work to establish what conspiracy stories circulate in African American neighborhoods and has then categorized her findings and shown how they fit in with other fears and fantasies about racial interaction that permeate through the culture, and how they have long historical roots. In sum, all of the approaches outlined in this section aim to read conspiracy theories alongside (and in challenge to) other popular ways of making sense of the interconnectedness of the world and its events.

Conspiracy Theories since the 1960s

The first wave of theorizing about conspiracy theories emerged in the wake of the outburst of anti-communist hysteria, and in some ways the models that were developed spoke to the need to make sense of that immediate past. Since the mid-1990s there has been a renewed interest (both by academics and journalists) in trying to explain conspiracy theories, and this can be seen as a result of the sudden emergence of a seemingly new and pervasive conspiracy culture that has as its most prominent emblem the television show *The X-Files*, but which in all likelihood dates back to the political turmoil of the 1960s in general and the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King in particular. Quite a few of these

recent studies have speculated that there has been some kind of shift in conspiracy theory since the 1960s or thereabouts.

One explanation for the increasing prominence of conspiracy theories in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century is that there have quite simply been more conspiracies, many of which have been uncovered. For example, the political scientist Ray Pratt suggests that it is no surprise that there are so many films about omnipresent surveillance and government corruption because there has been so much irrefutable evidence that the authorities really are up to no good. This kind of approach starts from the possibility that a fair measure of recent paranoia is fully justified.

Other critics argue that representations of conspiracy and paranoia in film and novels are not so much realist portrayals of what is really going on as they are distorted and stylized responses to a world that has become impossible to make sense of through traditional means. The literary critic Fredric Jameson has suggested that the conspiracy narratives of Hollywood films and popular thrillers are an expression of people's inability to make sense of how the world fits together in the age of globalization. He argues that people turn to these kinds of stories because they seem to offer a simplified handle on what is really going on in a postmodern world that, for many people, has disintegrated into incoherent and overwhelming fragmentation of media images and cultural styles that seem to jumble up past, present, and previously distinct cultures in one big global supermarket. In effect, conspiracy narratives offer people a way of threading together into a coherent and revelatory plot the endless flood of soundbites; but, warns Jameson, although these accounts may promise clarity, they only end up mystifying what's going on and so make the attempt to locate ourselves within it even harder.

A different way of looking at the nature of conspiracy theories in the age of postmodernity is offered by the literary critic Timothy Melley. Finding in his reading of a range of postwar American novels and works of social theory a recurrent sense of panic at the imagined threat to individual agency at the hands of conspiring forces, Melley draws two

conclusions. The first is that the obsession with protecting a sense of rugged selfhood (sometimes known as possessive individualism) has been a long-running theme in U.S. literature, philosophy, and politics. The second is that this obsession has taken on a new twist in recent times, as Americans have found themselves (as Jameson points out) under threat of disintegrating into incoherence amid all the profusion of conflicting styles and codes that make up our sense of individuality. People are paranoid, the argument goes, about becoming schizophrenic.

A different approach (e.g., Knight, Massumi) argues that there has been a shift in the nature and function of conspiracy theories since the 1960s and that it has intensified since the end of the cold war in the early 1990s. Whereas conspiracy theories once offered a paradoxically comforting sense of identity (only by knowing who your enemy is can you really know who you are, the theory goes), they now are unable to clearly identify a specific enemy or manageable threat and so no longer serve to bolster national or group coherence in the way they once did. Secure paranoia has in effect given way to insecure paranoia, as the clear-cut them-and-us political tensions of the cold war have given way to the more confusing geopolitics of global terrorism and other borderless threats such as pollution and disease that promote a permanent environment of risk and uncertainty. In the wake of September 11, it remains to be seen whether we are entering a new phase in the history of conspiracy theories in the United States, or whether that traumatic event will be interpreted in very familiar ways.

Conclusion

As with other controversial social phenomena (such as religious faith or belief in science), the battle lines amid competing explanations are often deeply entrenched and politically motivated. Accounts that emphasize the dangers of the paranoid style and lament the gullibility of conspiracy theorists tend to (but do not always) emerge from a conservative view of human nature and history, whereas approaches that highlight the role that conspiracy theory plays in giving voice to popular grievances (however distorted) usually rely on a

more liberal understanding of society and culture. Often each camp is talking about a different set of examples, so that each theory makes sense only in its own context. Since conspiracy theories have taken on so many different guises in different historical periods, there is good reason to think that there is no one-size-fits-all theory that can encompass and explain all the dizzying variety.

Conspiracy theory seems to be mutating all the time, fulfilling diverse functions for different people at distinct historical moments, often in quite unpredictable ways. For example, some commentators (e.g., Kelly) have pointed how recently there seems to have been a convergence between, on the one hand, a revived version of traditional right-wing conspiracy theories that talk about the shadowy influence of unelected globalist groups like the Bilderbergers and the United Nations, and on the other a more countercultural attack on the influence of undemocratic forms of national and international institutions such as the CIA and the World Trade Organization. This kind of "fusion paranoia," where Right meets Left, demands a rethink of traditional accounts of everyday politics and popular protest movements. Whichever interpretation you follow, what is becoming increasingly clear is that conspiracy theory can no longer be dismissed as a trivial sideshow to real politics, but has become a part of political and cultural life in the United States that demands to be taken seriously.

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