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The Ontological Status of Conspiracy Theory

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(for Kevin Coogan)

Is conspiracy theory a delusion of the Right which has infected the Left as well? Leftist Conspiracy Theorists sometimes make uncritical use of the texts of Rightist Conspiracy Theorists — delving into the work of the Liberty Lobby for JFK Assassination tidbits, picking up Birchist notions about the CFR/Bilderberg/Rockefeller “liberal” internationalists, etc., etc. Since anti-semitism can be found on the Left as well as the Right, echoes of the *Protocols* may be heard from both directions. Even some anarchists are attracted to “Historical Revisionism”. Anti-capitalism or economic populism on the Right has its counterpoint on the Left in “Red Fascism”, which broke the surface of History in the Hitler/Stalin Pact, and has come back to haunt us in the bizarre European “Third Wave” amalgamation of Right and Left extremism, a phenomenon which emerges in the USA in the libertine nihilism and “satanism” of anarcho-fascist groups like Amok Press and Radio Werewolf — and conspiracy theory plays a big role in all these ideologies.

If conspiracy theory is essentially right wing, it can only be so because it posits a view of History as the work of individuals rather than groups. According to this argument, a Mae Brussel-type theory (she believed that Nazis had penetrated American Intelligence and Government at policy level) may appear Leftist but in fact provides no sustenance for genuine dialectical analysis, since it ignores economics and class struggle as causal forces, and instead traces all events to the machinations of “hidden” individuals. Even the anti-authoritarian Left may sometimes adopt this low opinion of conspiracy theory, despite the fact that it is not bound by any dogmatic belief in economic determinism. Such anarchists would agree that to believe in conspiracy theory is to believe that elites can influence History. **Anarchism posits that elites are simply carried by the flow of History and that their belief in their own power or agency is pure illusion.** If one were to believe otherwise, such anarchists argue, then Marx and Lenin would be correct, and conspiratorial vanguardism would be the best strategy for the “movement of the social”. (The existence of vanguardism proves that the Left — or at least the authoritarian Left — has not merely been tainted accidentally with conspiracy theory: vanguardism IS conspiracy!) The Leninists say the state is a conspiracy, either of Right or Left-take your choice. The anarchists argue that the state does not “have” power in any absolute or essential sense, but that it merely usurps the power which, in essence, “belongs” to each individual, or to society *en masse*. The state’s apparently conspiratorial aspect is therefore illusory — mere ideological wanking on the part of politicians, spies, bankers and other scum, blindly serving the interests of their class. Conspiracy Theory is therefore of interest only as a kind of sociology of culture, a tracking of the delusory fantasies of certain in-groups and out-groups — but conspiracy theory itself has no ontological status.

This is an interesting theory with a great deal of merit, especially as a critical tool. However, as an ideology, it suffers from the same flaw as any other ideology. It constructs an absolute Idea, then explains reality in terms of absolutes. The authoritarian Right and Left share a view of the ontological status of elites or vanguards in History; the anti-authoritarian response is to shift the ontological-Historical weight to individuals or groups; but neither theory has bothered to question the ontological status of History, or for that matter of ontology itself.

In order either to confirm or deny conspiracy theory categorically one must believe in the category of "History". But since the 19th century "History" has fragmented into dozens of conceptual shards — ethno-history, psycho-history, social history, history of things and ideas and mentalities, cliometrics, micro-history — these are not competing ideologies of History, but simply a multiplicity of histories. The notion that History is made by "great men", or that History is the outcome of blind struggle between economic interests, or that History "is" anything specific at all, cannot really survive this fragmentation into an infinity of narratives. The productive approach to such a complex is not ontological but epistemological; i.e., we now ask not what "History" "is", but rather what and how we can know of and from the many many stories, erasures, appearances and disappearances, palimpsests and fragments of the multiple discourses and multiple histories of the inextricably tangled complexities of human becoming.

Thus we might posit (as an epistemological exercise if nothing else) the notion that although human beings are carried along or moved by class interests, economic forces, etc., we can also accept the possibility of a feedback mechanism, whereby the ideologies and actions of both individuals and groups can modify the very "forces" which produce them.

In fact it seems to me that as anarchists of one sort or another we must adopt some such view of matters, or else accept that our agitation, education, propaganda, forms of organization, uprisings, etc., are essentially futile, and that only "evolution" can or will bring about any significant change in the fabric of society and life. This may or may not be true of the long duree of human becoming, but it is manifestly not true on the level of individual experience of everyday life. Here a kind of rough existentialism prevails, such that we must act as if our actions could be effective, or else suffer in ourselves a poverty of becoming. Without the will to self-expression in action, we are reduced to precisely nothing. This is unacceptable. Therefore, even if one could prove that all action is illusion (and I do not believe that any such proof is available), we would still face the problem of desire. Paradoxically we are forced (on pain of utter negation) to act as if we freely choose to act, and as if action can bring about change.

On this basis it seems possible to construct a non-authoritarian theory of conspiracy theory which neither denies it altogether nor elevates it to the status

of an ideology. In its literal sense of “breathing together”, conspiracy may even be thought of as a natural principle of anarchist organization. Face to face, unmediated by any control, together we construct our social reality for ourselves. If we must do so clandestinely, in order to avoid the mechanisms of mediation and control, then we have perpetrated a kind of conspiracy. But more: we can also see that other groups may organize clandestinely not to avoid control but to attempt to impose it. It’s pointless to pretend that such attempts are always futile, because even if they fail to influence “History” (whatever that is), they can certainly intersect with and impact upon our everyday lives. To take one example, anyone who denies the reality of conspiracy must face a difficult task indeed when attempting to explain away the activities of certain elements within Intelligence and the Republican Party in the USA over the last few decades. Never mind the Kennedy Assassination, that spectacular boondoggle; forget the remnants of the Gehlen Org who were lurking around Dallas; but how can one even begin to discuss Nixon’s plumbers, Iran/Contra, the S&L “crisis”, the show-wars against Libya, Grenada, Panama, and Iraq, without some recourse to the concept of “conspiracy”? And even if we believe that the conspirators were acting as agents of blind forces, etc., etc., can we deny that their actions have actually produced ramifications on the level of our own everyday lives? The Republicans launched an open “War on Drugs”, for example, while secretly using cocaine money to finance right wing insurgency in Latin America. Did anyone you know die in Nicaragua? Did anyone you know get caught up in the hypocritical “war” on marijuana? Did anyone you know fall into the misery of crack addiction? (Let’s not even mention the CIA’s heroin dealing in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan.)

As Carl Oglesby points out, sophisticated conspiracy theory posits no single, all-powerful, over-riding cabal in charge of “History”. That would indeed be a form of stupid paranoia, whether of the Left or the Right. Conspiracies rise and fall, spring up and decay, migrate from one group to another, compete, collude, collide, implode, explode, fail, succeed, erase, forge, forget, vanish. Conspiracies are symptoms of the great “blind forces” (and hence useful as metaphors if nothing else), but they also feed back into those forces and sometimes even affect or effect or infect them. Conspiracies, in effect, are not **the** way history is made, but are rather parts of the vast complex of myriads of ways in which our multiple stories are constructed. Conspiracy Theory cannot explain everything but it can explain something. If it has no ontological status, nevertheless it does have its epistemological uses.

Here's a hypothesis:

History (small “h”) is a kind of chaos. Within history are embedded other chaoses, if one can use such a term. Late “democratic” Capitalism is one such chaos, in which power and control have become exceedingly subtle, almost alchemical, hard to locate, perhaps impossible to define. The writings of Debord, Foucault, and Baudrillard, have broached the possibility that “power itself” is empty, “disappeared”, and been replaced by the mere violence of the spectacle. But if history is a chaos the spectacle can only be seen as a “strange attractor” rather than as some sort of causative force. The idea of “force” belongs to classical physics and has little role to play in chaos theory. And if capitalism is a chaos and the spectacle is a strange attractor, then the metaphor can be extended: — we can say that the “Republican” conspiracies are like the actual patterns generated by the strange attractor. The conspiracies are not causal — but, then, nothing is really “causal” in the old classical sense of the term.

One useful way in which we can, so to speak, see into the chaos that is history, is to look through the lens provided by the conspiracies. We may or may not believe that conspiracies are mere simulations of power, mere symptoms of the spectacle — but we cannot dismiss them as empty of all significance.

Rather than speak of conspiracy theory we might instead try to construct a poetics of conspiracy. A conspiracy would be treated like an aesthetic construct, or a language-construct, and could be analyzed like a text. Robert Anton Wilson has done this with his vast and playful “Illuminati” fantasy. We can also use conspiracy theory as a weapon of agit-prop. Conspiracies of “power” make use of sheer disinformation; the least we can do in retaliation is to trace it to its source. Indeed we should avoid the mystique of conspiracy theory, the fantasy that conspiracy is all-powerful. Conspiracies can be blown. They can even be defeated. But I fear they cannot simply be ignored. The refusal to admit any validity to conspiracy theory is itself a form of spectacular delusion-blind belief in the liberal, rational, daylight world in which we all have “rights”, in which “the system works”, in which “democratic values will prevail in the long run” because Nature has so decreed it.

History is a big mess. Maybe conspiracies don't work. But we have to act as if they do work. In fact the non-authoritarian movement not only needs its own conspiracy theory, it needs its own conspiracies. Whether they “work” or not. Either we all breath together or we each suffocate on our own. “They” are conspiring, never doubt it, those sinister clowns. Not only should we arm ourselves with conspiracy theory, we should have our own conspiracies — our TAZ's — our ontological guerilla commando hit-squads — our Poetic Terrorists

— our chaos cabals — our secret societies. Proudhon said so. Bakunin said so. Malatesta said so. It's anarchist tradition.

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