

Mapping the Invisible: Notes on the Reason of Conspiracy Theories

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"there is no such thing as a coincidence^a Nothing happens in this universe^a unless entity wills it to happen".

- William S. Burroughs

In July 1997, the term "conspiracy theory" was included for the first time in the pages of the supplement to the prestigious *Oxford English Dictionary*. The appearance of this entry recognises and validates the popularity that conspiracy theories have enjoyed since the end of the Cold War. They seem, indeed, to have become the one pre-eminent mode by which the unfolding of contemporary events are read.¹ The impression that they are proliferating can be explained by the fact that more and more people have the qualities and the resources needed to track down conspiracies and make them public. The internet plays a fundamental role in this. The websites www.parascope.com, www.conspire.com and www.conspiracy.net, or to a lesser extent, www.disinfo.com, describe scenarios for various small and large conspiracies, from Diana's accident orchestrated by the British Secret Services to the Bush family's connections with Osama bin Laden.² The imprint of terrorist activity after 11 September 2001 has further intensified paranoiac thinking by reifying the rhetoric of suspicion.³ After all, terrorists are the emblematic figures of conspiracies.⁴

Conspiracy theories, intrigues and other *théories du complot* appear when a dramatic event takes place, and with the feeling that official explanations understate its implications and tone down its significance. Conspiracies theories - the apprehension of the conspiracy by those not involved in it ; focus on tangible facts, those that official accounts would ignore. In other words, a conspiracy theory begins when someone notices that the

explanations do not match the facts. The French journalist/political activist Thierry Meyssan's bestseller, *L'Effroyable Imposture*, is a perfect illustration of this reasoning.⁵ Meyssan's objective is to reveal the inside story of the September 11 attacks, making it out to be a secret scheme hatched by some elements of the United States government. By comparing many official photographs of the Pentagon, which was ripped apart by a hijacked plane crashing into it, he is amazed that "the lawn in the foreground is not spoiled at all, and the façade is only damaged to a width of 19 metres when the wingspan of the plane is 38 metres ; which would imply therefore that the wings and the rest of the cabin remained outside . But they cannot be seen on the photographs taken a few moments after the accident, nor is there any trace on the lawn, nor of debris of the fuselage. The Pentagon has even accepted that there wasn't any piece outside the building". He therefore deduces that it was impossible for a plane to have crashed at this place!

Such rationale continues to impress by its vision of causality, its effort to track down every possible relevant detail where there is no accident; everything is connected, intended and meaningful. This is why conspiracy theorists are often accused of connecting too many threads, of fighting with fictive enemies and ending up with simplifications - of aligning themselves therefore with rumour rather than information. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics", an essay by the historian Richard Hofstadter that was published during the McCarthy period at the beginning of the Cold War, still gives a sense of the tone of studies of this phenomenon. He affirms that conspiracy theories are collective "paranoid delusions"⁶. The majority of the literature on the subject adopts his line of thinking, with its pejorative and exotic approach to conspiracy theories, and a focus on fundamentalism, secret societies, cult religions or extremist groups. Since Hofstadter, the most common strategy of debunking conspiracy theory has been to marginalise the purveyors of conspiracy theory as pathological. It established the idea that paranoiac social thought is based on ironic, cynical and transgressive world views, constructed from partial truths that were a grotesque version of critical theory's own fascination.⁷ The leading Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson participated indirectly in this kind of rhetoric when he asserted that conspiracy theories were regressive, "debased", a "degraded attempt to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system", and a "poor person's mapping of the postmodern age"⁸.

Conspiracy theories have, however, become so deeply entrenched in the political imagination that they cover every point of the political spectrum. They fashion right-wing and left-wing with the same vigour. Conspiratorial explanations have become a central feature of political discourse, a way of understanding power that appeals to both marginalised groups and the power elite. In a way, it does not matter if conspiracy theories are true or are fantasy; what is more important here is whether, through these, people achieve consciousness of their situation.

The "contemporary paranoid style", described by the anthropologist George Marcus to go beyond Hofstadter's presuppositions of irrationality, leads one to considerably review the approach to the issue.⁹ Groups of people might share paranoiac views, but their views

exist within reasonable structures of explanations. For Marcus, there are two contextual frameworks to this issue:

1) The Cold War legacy. The Cold War is defined as a massive project of paranoid social thoughts and actions which have impregnated every dimension of mainstream culture ; right up to the conceptual rhetoric and frameworks by social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, whose conceptual frame is immersed in an idea of class conspiracy and used to interpret the hierarchy of taste in Western societies. Theorists of schizophrenia, such as Ronald Laing, assert that the cause of schizophrenia can be a permanent conspiracy perpetrated by the family against the child. As for the cultural critic Jamer Hunt, he goes on to skilfully propose the hypothesis that the paranoid speculation is at the heart of every theory.¹⁰

2) A crisis of representation, and meta-narratives as a mode of explaining the world. It is not strange if the proliferation of conspiracy narratives arises in an age supposedly marked by the disappearance of grand explanatory schemes.

For those who adopt this line, "there is truth to be found in suspicions of power ; that, in the cases they consider, power does, without a doubt, conspire and that, consequently, the suspicious may be 'paranoid within reason'"¹¹. They tend to argue that attempts to disprove conspiracy theories are just efforts to impose dominant ideological views on those who are "backward", "irrational" or "superstitious". The case of dietrology is interesting here. Dietrology is the science or the search for what is hidden behind (*dietro*) an event. The term was coined in the troubled Italy of the 1970s and '80s. It was used ironically, notably by the right-wing press, to ridicule an excessive tendency to blame secret forces close to the government for all inexplicable murders, kidnappings, bombings or accidents taking place during this period. But the inseparable irony of the word itself has often been used against its users, when it became clear that dietrological theses pertaining to some of these incidents were not so far from the truth. In the same way, the anthropologist Misty Bastian, who studies the media narratives of an elite murder ring in Nigeria, shows that the emergence of conspiracy theories in Nigeria to describe an environment of anxiousness, mistrust and rumours towards the government does not give any place to irrationality.¹² Conspiracy theory cannot simply be pathologised with a sweeping gesture. This is not to say we must open our arms to all conspiracy theory. It is to assert that diagnoses of political paranoia are themselves political statements.

Conspiracy is conventionally understood as being a clandestine project directed towards getting an outcome. It plays on the secret and the invisible. A 'good' conspiracy would be one that is undetectable, providing no clues of its existence. Conspiracy theorists, consequently, have the task of exposing ; making visible ; the clandestine causative agent. This desire to establish connections and to dramatise intrigues indicates the utility of conspiracy as a refuge for imagination, in which explanations can be constructed outside of officially sanctioned information. In fact, it would seem that the conspiracy theories, far from being simplifying and limiting, make the world more complex by focusing on hidden and contradictory logics, and by proposing alternative means for understanding and

grasping the world. In addition, it is a world where international elites encourage pluralist democracy and market transparency, and where American foreign policy continues to be led through opaque processes which bear the marks of conspiracy^a

Conspiracy and Globalisation

For more than a decade, there has been a growing chorus celebrating what has generally been understood as the start of a new epoch, the area of globalisation, of information society for others, of millennial capitalism for yet others, even empire for a few. A basic, often-implicit assumption is that globalisation is an evolutionary process that is today unifying the world, a phenomenon that has never before occurred in world history. As a process, it consists in the transnationalisation of the flux of capital, people, technologies, information and the like, an increase in the density of interaction between different parts of the world. This is one of the most generally conceded aspects of the phenomenon.¹³

Globalisation is accepted more than ever because of the possibility of being represented by a multiplicity of agents, whatever their degree of involvement in the movements under way. The opposition between a small number of exploiters becoming eternally richer, and a majority of exploited becoming always more dispossessed, dominates this imagination ; even if it does not correspond to the economic reality. The majority of the inhabitants of the periphery feels excluded from a process which overturns customs and ways of living and dying, of hoping and despairing, without bringing to it the prosperity promised by governments or international organisations. Mistrust vis-à-vis the world system, coupled with suspicion towards nation-states, stirs up fear and paranoiac feeling in such a way that many see in these changes or in their own immobility the work of ill-intentioned agents or the activity of the richest and the most powerful - especially the work of Westerners or Americans. In this sense, it is not surprising that the political specialist Zaki Laïdi wonders if "globalisation is the latest Western plot".

It is important to emphasise that the much-vaunted newness assigned to the globalisation age resides less in its factual, or exceptional, nature, than in its assimilation into an unprecedented historical process translated by the category of globalisation. This is why social players make globalisation out to be responsible for the reorganisation of power and knowledge in the world, and it is why they also use it as a theoretical platform to grasp the metamorphoses taking place. From this arises also, without doubt, the success enjoyed by conspiracy theories that provide a trajectory and an explanation for globalisation. Conspiracy theories presume that events are caused by people acting, collaborating, organising, swindling, cheating and seeking power. They are not ready to pay as much attention to impersonal forces such as geopolitics, the market economy, globalisation, social evolution or what cyberpunks called "autonomous corporations". They remain radically empirical by looking for elements that give flesh to the logic of conspiracy.

Through political discourses and practices of certain states, international organisations or NGOs, globalisation acquires a manifest reality. The idea of intrigue informs its distinctive traits, its intensity and its long-distance effects. For it must be admitted that those who

adhere to the conspiracy idea have good reasons to do so, to be suspicious, in the face of such a hegemonic power on which they depend for survival. The practices of international firms or those active under the framework of geopolitical relations conform in their own way to this fatal reality. Manipulations engineered by industrial giants such as Shell or Union Carbide, for example, are well-known facts. In South Korea, the anthropologist Laurel Kendall has examined people from diverse social classes who interpreted the Asian financial crisis in 1998 through the prism of Shamanism in order to relieve their anxieties and to untangle the threads of the menace.¹⁴

In this sense, Fredric Jameson is right; conspiracy theories are a part of the response to impersonal forces and diffuse structures generated by contemporary societies (global flux, large organisations, bureaucracies, informational networks⁸).¹⁵ Those who resort to them identify in this way who does what and why they do it, for the strength of paranoid thought lies in its perfect coherence: it does not leave any space for error, failure or ambiguity. Conspiracy theories give meaning to occurrences, to equivocal or dramatic situations. They are attempts to find a narrative for the contradictions and transformations that are animating the world. This is most certainly a way to make them more intelligible by making it possible to reduce the tension arising out of the pressure exerted by reality. Narration of events and facts is the main form of legitimating knowledge in conspiracy theory. The idea of intrigue tends to become the pre-eminent "metadiscourse of modernity", a scheme capable of explaining complex social events, even the *lingua franca* to track the tensions of what George Bush baptised in 1991 as the "New World Order"¹⁶. One could almost call it a means to re-enchant the world, trying to conceptualise the relation between individuals and larger social bodies.

Occultism and Transparency

Transparency is one of the key words of the New World Order. It is an emergent norm for neoliberal democracy and economic policy. International firms, as much as the UN, extol transparency as an objective and a pre-condition for the right to economic assistance and for creating a favourable atmosphere for international investors. To anthropologists Harry G. West and Todd Sanders, "transparency is invoked by those who think of themselves as modern as they talk about their vision of a modern society"¹⁷. 'Transparency' has become a synonym of good governance, another way to celebrate the rationality of modern society.¹⁸ Of course, conspiracy theory ideas construct 'truths' that do not coincide with the 'truths' constructed by the discourse of transparency. Both are ideologically antagonistic formations. Conspiracy theories suggest that "there is more to what happens in the world than meets the eye ; that reality is anything but 'transparent'¹⁹. Transparency politics have nourished a paranoid axiom: the more we are told that power is "transparent", the more we feel need to say that it is not!

In regimes of transparency, intrigue and paranoia constitute a predicament inherent to the institutional order, for the logic of bureaucratic rationality recommends secrecy. The objective purpose of rational bureaucracies requires a norm of conduct free from public

opinion, a norm where knowledge is kept secret. Secrecy is a necessary condition for maintaining the structure of domination over the outside, but it is also in conflict with democratic ideals of openness. The germs of certain forms of contemporary paranoia originate in this paradoxical situation. Cyberpunk as a genre described this kind of situation between information-rich corporations (those who know the secrets) and their servants and the underclass that exists outside corporate enclaves. In his paranoid stories, the proto-cyberpunk novelist Philip K. Dick described regularly a world where governments and large organisations are constructed in terms of conspiracy created by those who have knowledge in order to control an underclass.

It is ironic to think that the sociologist Anthony Giddens identified trust as one of the main constitutive characteristics of modernity ; trust in the operations of institutions whose operations we cannot directly control nor follow.²⁰ But modernity generates the same impenetrability of power that it claims to prevent. The belief that power is still conspiring even under a regime of electoral democracy may be expressed in Mozambique or in Indonesia in the form of references to the dark world of sorcery.²¹

Whereas officially appointed representatives of the New World Order proclaim their desire to base themselves on a universal discourse celebrating the transparency of power (through modernisation, economic liberalisation, the democratisation of political forms and information, the affirmation of human rights, the cleaning up of the black economy and the dismantling of mafia networks), local players looking for meanings apt for sociability harvest the ashes of events. They hope in this way to get close to the origin of those forces likely to redirect to their own advantage the flows of power that circulate in the world. Rather than resisting power, they seek to reveal and direct the hidden forces that are supposed to sustain their world, to explore the nuances of power, and to take advantage of this ambivalence. Because a large number of social players experience modernity as a blurring of landmarks, a contradictory process favouring both fluidity and fragmentation, local, regional and world powers seem to them inaccessible, impenetrable and, most of the time, ill-intentioned. From this arises the feeling of threat or danger. And despite the variety in beliefs and cosmologies, ordinary people and those who are dominated conspire to suspect the Others: those, one could say, who possess extraordinary powers, those who determine the fate of this world.

Postscript

This interest in conspiracy theories has not come about from reading William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo, but from an interest in the activities of groups of artists and activists such as Bureau d'Etudes (<http://utangente.free.fr/>), The Speculative Archive (www.speculativearchive.org), Trevor Paglen (www.paglen.com) and Mark Lombardi (who was the first to establish the connections between the Bush family and Bin Laden). All of them share the desire to reveal the flip side of the playing cards of this New World Order, which, if one is to follow them, reifies an era of suspicion. In this context their work does not escape the contemporary paranoid style; it allies itself with the activities of conspiracy theoreticians.

The neo-conceptualist work of Bureau d'Etudes is concerned with mapping the different structures of financial networks by using complex graphics that formalise their models and connections with a semi-scientific exactitude. It could be viewed as a relevant reply to Jameson and his "poor's cognitive mapping" to map networks of power too vast to be adequately represented. Trevor Paglen, experimental geographer, writer and artist, works in the Department of Geography of the University of California, Berkeley. His work encodes and decodes cultural and physical landscapes. One of his projects documents the secret military "landscapes" in the United States, from clandestine installations in remote regions to massive infrastructures.

In the light of such artistic research, without doubt also because their demonstrations and results go through the visual, the mode of paranoia appears to be less ideology or faith than an inventive, effective and capacious practice of agency. Thinking about conspiracy theory is to raise the question of the legitimisation of knowledge and how to produce knowledge. One could indeed begin to ask questions about an aesthetics of paranoia, because the contemporary paranoid style is more than just an expression of marginalisation and alienation in a seemingly hostile world.

Translated from the French by Aruna Popuri; additional translation by Rana Dasgupta

NOTES

1. Peter Knight. *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files* (Routledge, 2000, London).
2. The paradigm of contemporary conspiracy theory remains with regard to J. F. Kennedy's assassination. See Don DeLillo's novel *Libra* (Penguin, 1989, New York).
3. On the "suspect" condition after September 11, see (ed.) John Knechtel, *Suspect* (MIT Press, 2005, Cambridge).
4. The novelist Don DeLillo thinks that terrorism has become the main narrative mode for telling the world.
5. English translation: Thierry Meyssan, *9/11: The Big Lie* (Carnot USA Books, 2003, New York). The text and various responses to it can be consulted online: www.effroyable-imposture.net
6. Initially published in 1952, Richard Hofstadter's article "The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays" can be found in (ed.) Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999, London), pp. 3-21.
7. Thus the psychologist Floyd Rudmin proposes to consider conspiracy theories as "naive deconstructive history".
8. Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991, Durham). Elsewhere, Jameson has suggested that conspiracy narratives of Hollywood films are an expression of people's inability to make sense of how the world fits together in the age of globalisation. He argues that people turn to these kinds of stories because they seem to offer a simplified handle on what's really going on in the "contemporary multinational society"; see his *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Indiana University Press, 1992, Bloomington). For a critical study, see Fran Mason, "A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping", in (ed.) Peter Knight, op. cit., pp. 40-56.

9. George E. Marcus (ed.). *Paranoia within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation* (University Press of Chicago, 1999, Chicago).
10. Jamer Hunt. "Paranoid, Critical, Methodical, Dali, Koolhaas and^a". In (ed.) George E. Marcus, *ibid.*, pp. 21-30. For the literary critic Timothy Melley, "the difference between a paranoid theory and a brilliant theory may only be a matter of how much explanatory power the theory has for a given interpretative community". See Melley's "Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy", in (ed.) Peter Knight, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.
11. Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (eds.). *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order* (Duke University Press, 2003, Durham/London).
12. Misty Bastian. "Diabolic Realities: Narratives of Conspiracy, Transparency, and 'Ritual Murder' in the Nigerian Popular Print and Electronic Media". In (eds.) Harry G. West and Todd Sanders, *ibid.*, pp. 65-91.
13. Jonathan Friedman. "From Roots to Routes: Tropes for Trekkers". In *Anthropological Theory* II, 2 (2002).
14. Laurel Kendall. "Gods, Markets and the IMF in the Korean Spirit World". In (eds.) Harry G. West and Todd Sanders, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-64.
15. "Conspiracy theory^a begins^a with an attempt to defend the integrity of the self against the social order. To understand one's relation to the social order through conspiracy theory, in other words, is to see oneself in opposition to 'society'. Timothy Melley, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
16. Susan Harding and Kathleen Stewart. "Anxieties of Influence: Conspiracy Theory and Therapeutic Culture in Millennial America". In (eds.) Harry G. West and Todd Sanders, *op. cit.*, pp. 258-86.
17. Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (eds.), *ibid.*, p. 7
18. For instance, Berlin Transparency International, an organisation dedicated to combat corruption in the domain of international commerce, was founded in May 1993. www.transparency.de/index.html
19. Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 6
20. Anthony Giddens. *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 1990, Stanford).
21. Harry G. West. "Who Rules Us Now? Identity Tokens, Sorcery, and Other Metaphors in the 1994 Mozambican Elections". In (eds.) Harry G. West and Todd Sanders, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-124.