


PARANOIA WITHIN REASON

A CASEBOOK ON
CONSPIRACY AS EXPLANATION

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CONSPIRACY THEORY'S WORLDS

There's so much to say and so little time. I hardly know where to begin. Things are already out of hand.

Maybe I should start with the world that has made conspiracy theory not only possible (and popular) but ever present, unavoidable, pervasive, compulsive, fun, frightening, and fascinating often to the point of a paranoid-mystical urgency. The world that stands as conspiracy theory's condition of possibility. The networked world of system and power, the constant shock waves that never quite wake us from the dream world of late capitalism but replicate states of anesthesia and obsession. The always already replicated, the simulacra, coupled with the suspicion that someone is hiding the REAL behind the curtain. The burgeoning new world order of starkly divided camps where haves and have-nots have become, more simply and efficiently and finally, winners and losers. This coupled with a desire for an Other order of a true US and THEM coming from someplace outside our control. A cultural politics awash in inchoate yet palpable structures of feeling that are themselves peppered with the occasional shock of half-recognition that there is something going on. The sure knowledge (and experience) that everything is interconnected and merging—a seduction, a dreaming, a moving toward and within—coupled with the guilty pang, the moment of terror when something whispers in our ear that the interconnectedness is all controlled by a dark and monolithic Other and we are in it, no exit.

Imagine this world as that moment when the simulated has attached itself to the REAL and overwhelmed it with kindness; the REAL reemerges as trauma and is endlessly repeated without resolution; events and phenomena call to us as haunting specters lodged somewhere within the endless proliferation of images and reports. The more you know, the less you know. What causes cancer? Ozone depletion, smoking, radiation from microwaves, light bulbs, transformers, TVs (and what about heating pads and electric blankets left on all night?), hormone replacement therapy (HRT), the absence of vitamins in the

food we eat. Piles of information; it's hard to keep up; you can get paranoid trying. Who can tell the truth from the mistake, the inaccuracy, the flight of fancy, the lie, the cover-up, the manipulation, the disinformation? The paranoid can; that's the point of conspiracy theory—to jump the gun and throw yourself in the line of fire, to call the cards on the table because you've already lost, to find the clarity of the final showdown, to find a focus, to bring things to a head, to realize once and for all that things are even worse than the worst you could have imagined. (“So *shoot* me!” says the one accused and unable/unwilling to respond.)

Constant scanning, writing down the name of the latest cure (to be out in six months), predictions, prophesy, hypervigilance, self-help groups, keeping a diary, recovered memory buffs, history buffs, curiosity collectors, a pathological public sphere focused on trauma, trauma, trauma. The mantra of trauma. The mantra of plots. Conspiracy theory is a skeptical, paranoid, obsessive practice of scanning for signs and sifting through bits of evidence for the missing link. Enter the world of conspiracy theory (as we all do and must) and you enter the world of global systems with missing details. This is a world of hopelessly arcane, obscurantist systems that are expert at leaving a paper trail that cannot track them. The moment of seduction is the moment when the puzzle is almost solved but there is always something more you need, the missing piece. Conspiracy theory dreams of an end point, an ur-text, a pure and stable past, but it never gets there because it is always pushing the REAL to the outer edge of the horizon—a carrot to struggle toward.

Then there's the pleasure of the practice itself. The medium becomes the message and the home base: the speculating, the hypervigilant scanning, the scheming, the meticulous planning, the lists, the inventories of equipment, the clever bricolage of making do, the invention of new tools out of ordinary household products, the research expertise. Conspiracy theory is a hunter creeping through the woods at night on the track of a scent; nose to the ground, armed with a rigged-up spotlight to stop the deer dead in her tracks, it aims for an illuminated object, frozen at point-blank range—bull's eye. It both (a) fixes a final REAL and recreates (or endlessly replicates the fantasy of) a raw agency and (b) builds a spot of mystical merger where the subject gives itself up to the invisible forces of interconnection and merges with the object in a moment of abject communion. (If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.) Concrete objects sing with illumination. (One of the main items in the FBI's profile of a dangerous militia member is an obsessive compulsive attachment to one of a small number of particular makes of older, high-maintenance trucks. Other main characteristics include being a married man with children who has recently lost his job.)

Picture in this world a little man with a big head. I remember first hearing about this guy in Walter Benjamin's story about the storyteller—the guy who finds himself on the side of the road after a world war and suddenly realizes his

tiny, fragile human body is surrounded by a world of an overwhelming scale and unthinkable violence. Then picture him some years later when he's gotten caught up in the machinations of that big world, channeling its moves and orders like a spirit medium. Imagine him caught up in the panoptical function of always looking around, scanning the landscape for signs of something out of place or eruptions of the inchoate and at the same time looking for THE missing detail that will stop the merry-go-round.

Try to focus. There are things, details, signs, evidence. What about the brand-name sportswear that was supposed to have KKK symbols and messages sewn into the seams as a plot against African-American pride? Or how did the Heaven's Gaters decide that they needed to wear black Nikes and bring their lip balm and some quarters and take their glasses off and leave them folded by their sides? For some it's in the details.

Others find a monstrous object, an all-consuming pursuit like a Moby Dick. The little man with the big head comes alive against the giant adversary, the dreadful will that haunts him and draws him in. He knows he'll shatter. He brings it on himself; he brings it to a head. The encounter is the way to come to life. Like the guy who started "The Republic of Texas" in Fort Davis and brought things to a head by kidnapping neighbors and by the end of the drama there was a little man lost in the desert shooting guns at helicopters.

Or, to come back to the everyday, take the disorientation of standing in front of one of those maps of a mall where everything is laid out in clear view and the cardinal directions are given (nothing hidden from view) and there's a dot and an arrow pointing out "you are here" and yet the effect is hopeless confusion. You look back and forth between the map and the overwhelming scene around you and you wonder which way to go and how you ever got here to begin with. Some people, of course, are experts and have strategies: they get to know the mall from practice and they arm themselves with a purpose, a search for something in particular; or they make a decision (like the Heaven's Gaters' decision to carry lip balm) that they *like* to wander the malls (it's exercise, it gets them out of the house, they're looking for love). But even for the well-adjusted, conspiracy theories will drift into an ear. Everyone knows about the piped-in oxygen, the music and lighting planned to excite and manipulate, the planned disorientation. The pleasure of the mall is, secretly, the pleasure of giving in and taking things to excess or getting away with something (the tangible object captured and brought home to the drawer, or the price that really *is* a sale price)—if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

Conspiracy theory, and the mundane practices that root it on planet earth, can become a stable center in itself—the missing detail in a life. The little world of like thinkers one joins, the massive adversary always almost caught, the focus. The subject lurches into a communion with an object world full of tiny details and big structures of feeling. Contamination, communion, hope,

fear: politics and feelings grow palpable together. The details create the need for a plot. It's not that for conspiracy theory everything is always already a rigid, all too clear plot, but rather that the founding practice of conspiratorial thinking is the search for the missing plot. Think of it not as a prefabricated ideology (as if abstract, exegetical ideas were what ruled the world) but as a practice. An obsessive and skeptical practice of scanning and speculating from the realm of the concrete, undeniable, tangible detail to the realm of the final word, the system that makes sense of inchoate sensibilities and moments of strange convergence. It's a practice born of a world that cries out for interpretation.

Its goal is to find the traces of a REAL that sticks out of the system and simulacra like a gross protuberance and, at the same time, like a wound. It lives in a world where the line between inside and outside, fantasy and reality, animal and human and machine does not hold. This is a world full of gaps and the urge to find the missing link. It hums with the possibility that the uncanny is real and it hunkers down in fearful but excited expectation. We're waiting for something to happen—a drama, an endpoint, something to break the enclosure of untouchable systems and the drone of an endlessly repeating present.

The scanning gaze finds objects—points of focus—that combine the mechanics of “system” with the mechanics of “eruption” or dramatic “intrusion”: the omnipresent unmarked black helicopters that suddenly appear out of nowhere in a shock of noise and speed and looming threat, the international financiers that are taking over the world with untraceable paper trails on the one hand and the universal bar coding of citizens on the other (here the image of the UFO implants), mysterious diseases that come from the ventilation system of a building and suddenly kill masses of people, food additives that systematically sterilize black men but not white men. At moments the system goes too far and gets recorded on the ubiquitous home video whose omnipresent possibility mimics the logic of the seamless system itself. No exit. The constant search for one, for the REAL.

I remember a neighbor on a little lake in Michigan who would walk around the lake with a video camera in the dead of the winter, recording the condition of all the summer people's houses. He'd leave the camera running continuously so much of the time you were just walking along with him, listening to his breathing (like a horror movie) and his unbelievably mundane commentary on banks of snow and someone else's footsteps in the path—“Looks like somebody's beat me out here this morning.” Then he'd focus in and zoom close to some kind of protuberance down by the foundation in the front of a house. He'd speculate that there may have been broken pipes, now refrozen into lumps of ice sticking out from the foundation or a wall: there may be damage. Then the camera would zoom off again and we'd be back on the track, looking for the next drama, disaster, trauma that will signal the eruption of the REAL out of the endless loop of sign, simulation, replication, mimicry. At the moment of

shock we'd draw close; seduced, we'd lose ourselves in the detail (he would send copies of these alarming shots to his neighbors summering in Florida). Then we'd pull back and get on with the systematic routine that mimics the job of the security guard (which in turn mimics the panoptic mechanism of the "system").

Conspiracy theory repeats itself: it reenacts trauma; it's always returning to something you thought you knew but couldn't quite account for. It looks for the trace and fastens onto it. It's a fascination that quickly turns into horror and that then lends itself to fascination again. It alternates.

Conspiracy theory is a texting of everyday life where everything is connected and the connections are uncanny. There are moments of *déjà vu*, moments when the sense of overdetermination is palpable. Conspiracy theory lays a claim to a threshold state of consciousness where you are at once connected to the concrete tangible detail and projecting into a future, a higher knowledge, a leading edge, seeking an order behind the visible. It moves between the realms of story and event, the official and the unofficial story, the fantasy and the reality, the subject and the object: caught up in the nervous oscillation of no-man's land, it finds itself fascinated by transformation, encounter, risk. It gets excited and begins to prophesy and name: it cryptically foreshadows; it announces; it channels latent forces; it gives voice, embodies, enacts, creates a density and matter to floating effects. Or it puffs itself up with self-importance, grows big-headed and hot-winded. Or it gets scared and looks for an outside. No exit. It passes judgment, looks for proof, verifies. It gets spiritual and looks for an ur-text. It goes mad and looks for something to happen—drama, trauma, final purifying fire and regeneration out of the ashes. It grows anxious: it anticipates, plans, makes scrupulous lists and inventories, lays up stores for all contingencies. Or it sits in the comfort of a reading chair by the fire sifting through the pleasures of interpretation and the hunt: at moments, it finds itself sublime in its own preoccupations with presenting the unrepresentable.

Conspiracy theory lies whispering under the wallpaper of optimistic modernity. It channels the contradictions of a late capitalist world fueled by difference and uniformity, desire and despair, the bureaucratic self and the romantic action hero, a sudden convergence of "private" feeling with a "public" world, and the sense of being stuck in a moving, exhilarating, but endlessly looping present. Conspiracy theory channels both the up side and the down side of things: progress and abjection, enchantment and disenchantment. It combines radical doubt with the sense that the truth is out there. It knots together knowledge and desire, marginality and the status of being "in the know."

It tracks: it channels as it goes about its seemingly mundane and obsessively focused task of sniffing out the smoking gun. It's prolific: it's caught up in things. It's a way of tracking events and phenomena in an "information society" with (more than) a twist of trauma. It has good days and bad days just like

days on the Web. On a good day on the Web you can see forever; on a bad day you can enter a narrative madness, you can find yourself caught up, addicted, at once fixated and disoriented, both maniacally focused and alienated, stuck in an endless loop; you can grow angry, skeptical, suspicious of that “lost time” inside the probe. A good day is a surge of open possibility, freedom, newness. A bad day is abjection at the feet of obsession and the machine. One minute you’re lost in space, the next you’re the master of the universe. The Internet was made for conspiracy theory: *it is* a conspiracy theory: one thing leads to another, always another link leading you deeper into no thing and no place, floating through self-dividing and transmogrifying sites until you are awash in the sheer evidence that the Internet exists. The medium is the message again. Theory rules.

Conspiracy theory is a tense and twisted gathering of elements that do not meld but only feed on the mutual unsettling they highlight. That’s why conspiracy theory is all over the map: it’s right-wing one moment and left-wing the next. It’s modernist and postmodernist. It’s both an open and closed form of texting. It’s heavy-handed master narratives and hopelessly dispersed mumblings about this and that. It’s “inside” the system and “outside” it; it speaks from positions of power and powerlessness. It penetrates the subject to the bone and leaves us cold with detachment. It seduces and repulses. In its hermeneutics of suspicion and dream, (a) nothing is what it seems (nightmare forces beyond the scenes), and (b) anything could happen (everything is still possible). It is nostalgic and future oriented. It’s precise and hallucinatory, delusional and internally much too consistent; it’s as rational as they come and yet its key moments are moments of slippage: a (insane) leap (of faith) is at its core. It is apocalyptic and fundamentally banal, ordinary, and dull. One minute it’s drifting over the line into armed violence and the next it’s writing detailed recipes for how to build cocoonlike cells of utopian communities in a Robinson Crusoe-like fantasy land made up entirely of the practices of scavenging, cleaning up, ingenious refashioning of matter into useful technology, getting food, making do. Its discipline is both military and aligned with the neatness of the suburban lawn. It believes in experts and mystics; it’s cynical and it’s into self-help groups and the imagined communities of partial publics and counter-publics. At one moment it’s out there investigating cover ups and at the next moment it’s seeking cover—cocooning in a little world of its own that has its own headquarters, stores of supplies, uniforms, flags, constitutions, regular gun practice, and last stands. It believes equally in arcane knowledge and common sense. Its signs point at once to the hyperreal and to the inchoate or latent. It twists and turns in its role as the abject trauma and vengeful victor; rather than be reduced to the object of a panoptic gaze, it trains a listening eye on the world.

It shows us something about the nature of power and affect. And it channels something about the nature of theorizing. It throws its cards on the table in order to enter a space vibrant with the foundational anxieties and powerful force fields at work in the act of theorizing itself in moments of dread and desire, unwarranted hope and bitter disenchantment, crazed optimism and deadened cynicism, half-hidden fantasies and half-articulate, mostly unknown truths. It gives us (academics) the willies because it presents, point blank, the abject alternative to our own continuing modernist obsession with “the (pure) idea” and the act of discriminating (reason) that is still our ace of spades, our queen of hearts, our wild card, and our jack of all trades. But it also holds out the fascination with “the real” as an uncanny trace that may (or may not) be “the key” to something else so caught up in the tracks of our droning dualisms (subject/object, real/fantasy, inside/outside, active/passive) that it is no longer satisfied with the daily practice of maintaining the fences but begins to notice things out of the corners of its eyes.