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Conspiracy theories, culture and paranoia

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I have a fascination with conspiracy theories as evidenced by my enjoyment of films like *The Parallax View* and TV series' like *The X-Files* and yet I seem quite happy at times to see some views as paranoid, usually those I disagree with. I don't think I am alone in this and in such apparent contradiction I believe we can learn something about the ambivalent relationship Western culture has with both. Discussions about conspiracy theories and paranoia always seem, to me, to be dualistic but what I want to argue here is that they are flip-sides of the same coin. When someone takes up a position where they feel they know what is *really* going on in the world, drawing on conspiracy theories, they will be seen by some as paranoid. Rather than develop an intentionalist view of this, however, I want to examine some of the *effects* of both taking on a conspiratorial position and of positioning the other (an individual, group, organisation, nation and so on) as paranoid. In other words, what do we *do* by believing in conspiracy theories and what do we *do* when we call others paranoid?

When "we" adopt conpriatorial theories we, of course, see ourselves as knowing what is really going on. For their believers conspiracy theories help to simplify a bewilderingly complex world. They enable us to connect apparently disparate events through a narrative that sees the intentions behind mundane happenings. They also personalize events so that we have a focus for our suspicion and conspiracy films, for example, often have a person or group who are the "hidden hand" behind events. By subverting the taken-for-granted world they mobilise people into action against perceived threats. We know to our cost that the rhetoric of war serves to unify disparate national groups against an external threat and this worked well during the Cold War, Desert Storm and the bombing of Yugoslavia. Conspiratorial rhetoric works in similar ways often directed towards groups within a country and so, at a time of rapid geo-political change we increasingly see such accounts mobilized around political and religious groups and also around notions of ethnic identity as in parts of Eastern Europe.

On the one hand, conspiracy theories may fill believers with a sense of purpose and missionary zeal to convince others -- as the narrator tells us in the 1960s TV series *The Invaders* "now David Vincent knows that the invaders are here, that they have taken human form. Somehow he must convince a disbelieving world that the nightmare has already begun". Alternatively, they may encourage them to withdraw and regroup forces against expected attacks as in Waco. Through such processes, conspiracy theories enable their believers to construct a valued identity for themselves and to see non-believers as dupes or allies of their enemy. Some, like Hofstadter, see this position as primarily one adopted by minority political groups and there is some evidence to suggest that those who adopt a conspiratorial narrative are often from powerless groups. Mirowsky & Ross (Mirowsky, J. & Ross, C. E., 1983, 'Paranoia and the structure of powerlessness', American Sociological Review, 48, 228-239) reported that social positions characterized by powerlessness and by the threat of victimization and exploitation tended to produce paranoia. People in powerless positions are paranoid then, because it makes sense in a world where others really do have power over you.

Yet this is to simplify matters for conspiratorial accounts are also mobilised by politically powerful groups. Thus at the height of her government Margaret Thatcher, drawing implicitly on McCarthyite notions of Communist subversion, talked of British Trades Unions as the "enemy within". This strategy of marginalisation worked well in helping her to take extreme measures against the unions culminating in her systematic breaking of the National Union of Mineworkers during the year-long coal strike of the early 1980s.

These are some of the effects of conspiratorial accounts but this is only one side of the coin. What are some of the effects of labelling others as paranoid? In doing so, we simultaneously mark "them" as different and other from "us" and as abnormally and pathologically suspicious. We simultaneously see them not as "knowing what is really going on" but as fringe weirdos and so marginalize them and remove legitimacy from their views. Thus when Harold Wilson referred to a plot by the British Security Service (MI5) to destabilize his Labour administration in the mid 1970s a Conservative Member of Parliament called him "positively paranoic" and urged him to see a psychiatrist. Similarly, following her interview on British TV where she described plots against her by the British Royal family, Diana, the Princess of Wales, was said by a Conservative Minister to be "in the advanced stages of paranoia". Positioning the other as paranoid not only undermines the legitimacy of that person or group's views but it also serves powerful functions for those doing the positioning. In calling others paranoid we construct ourselves as rational, reasonable and plausible -- an identity clearly valued in Western culture.

Conspiracies do, of course, happen and there are times when suspicion is seen as legitimate but in Western culture, paranoia serves as a touchstone of what counts as reasonable suspicion. A recent opinion poll in the UK found that 24% of people had lied to others and 64% felt they had been lied to at least once during the previous day. Yet to act in the world as if one is being lied to on this scale would be to invite accusations of paranoia. We know deceit and surveillance occur but to comment on them is to be seen as paranoid. A good example of some of these paranoid traps can be found in the work of intelligence and security agencies. Would you believe a small-time Welsh Nationalist who told you that he had been followed by thirty eight MI5 agents on one day in a small Welsh fishing village? The scale seems ludicrous and yet Security Service evidence in a trial in the UK in 1993 reveals that this actually happened. A serious discussion of this kind of surveillance would quickly take the form of conspiratorial discourse, a discourse that would then inevitably and ineluctably be read as paranoid.

Scholars have described how the Tsarist secret police the Ochrana were so successful in infiltrating agent provocateurs into revolutionary fighting organizations plotting to overthrow the regime that, in a significant way the Russian revolution of 1917 was the product of the secret police. Similarly the British Labour MP Tony Benn has reported that the penetration of the National Union of Students by the Special Branch (a political and security branch of the British police) was so complete that, during one strike in 1966 one of the NUS's committees consisted entirely of Special Branch. For the intelligence communities and the organisations they inflitrate such narratives are entirely functional: intelligence agencies need credible threats to survive and threats of infiltration build group identity in the targets of those agencies. Thus, in the United States, the conspiratorial accounts on both sides of the Waco siege and the Oklahoma bombing served to warrant action taken both by right-wing and minority religious groupings *and* by the Federal government. Thus, following the reported ending of the Cold War we see Intelligence Agencies refocus their targetting from the USSR to terrorism, drugs and "rogue nations".

Writers like Philp K. Dick made great use of notions of reality-loops where one "reality" was suddenly discovered to be just a surface reality with another reality underneath and this was used to great effect in the film *Total Recall*. We can see what might be termed paranoia-loops created in attempts to address conspiratorial culture. Reactions to movements seen as conspiratorial and paranoid can be as overwhelming as the groups' rhetoric. Moreover, such moves themselves can become characterised by a paranoid narrative. Shaw has noted how religious cults' "paranoia about the outside world feeds on the outside world's paranoia about cults' paranoia which feeds on cults' paranoia" (Shaw, W., 1994, *Spying in Guru land: Inside Britain's Cults*, London, Fourth Estate). A traditional response to such concern is to pathologise those seen as dangerous by calling them paranoid a strategy that Shaw reveals to be double-edged.

At the same time, conspiracies and surveillance have so permeated Western culture that they are now seen as entertainment as we have seen in the success of *The X-Files*. We have moved from the time when the Big Brother of George Orwell's *1984* has been transformed into a prime-time television show across the world where volunteers willingly submit themselves to round-the-clock surveillance and we willingly watch them being watched. This permeation of a surveillance culture has led Tony Benn, in a recent House of Commons debate on the UK Police Bill, to comment about electronic surveillance (or "bugging"): "in the old days, those who talked about being bugged were described as paranoid; nowadays people say, 'What's new?' Both attitudes are wrong. We should not be regarded as paranoid if we know it is happening, and it should not be regarded as normal because everyone does it".

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