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Conspiracy Theories – 1: The Basics

According to a recent poll in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, one in five Germans believes that the U.S. government may have sponsored the 9-11 attacks. Among those under 30, the proportion is one in three. Conspiracy theories as insane as that one, or worse, currently corrupt the political thinking of the great majority of people in the world, including a substantial and influential minority in the West.

A conspiracy theory is

an explanation of observed events in current affairs and history ... which

alleges that those events were planned and caused in secret by powerful (or allegedly powerful) conspirators, who thereby...

benefit at the expense of others, and who therefore...

lie, and suppress evidence, about their secret actions, and...

lie about the motives for their public actions.

Conspiracy theories are widely regarded as characteristic of irrational modes of thinking. The very term 'conspiracy theory' is usually reserved for *irrational* explanations meeting the above criteria. For conspiracies do happen. Criminal conspiracies are proved every day in courts. Political conspiracies are discovered from time to time. If we can rationally explain a bank robbery as being the consequence of a conspiracy, why not a war? Or the world economic system? What distinguishes a conspiracy theory (irrational, by definition) from a sane opinion that a particular group of people worked in secret to bring about certain observed events for their own immoral purposes?

Here, the *irrefutability* of conspiracy theories is usually cited: to a conspiracy theorist, everything that happens, or could possibly happen, constitutes evidence for the conspiracy. If the alleged conspirators seem to benefit, then that is evidence against them. If they do not, then that is just evidence that the media and/or other conspirators are concealing the facts, or that something much more valuable is secretly at stake.

But there is more to it than irrefutability. There is more to it even than the tendency to invent (rather than merely reinterpret) evidence to conform to the conspiracy theory. For it is no coincidence that every (irrational) conspiracy theory is in fact false. Underlying their invalid arguments and mishandling of evidence in judging explanations, there is a pathological mistake in the

conspiracy theorists' conception of what constitutes an explanation in the first place.

Conspiracy Theories – 2: Lying About Motives

Here's a fairly classic conspiracy theory. It is that the Bush Administration's foreign policy is part of a plot to impose Fascism on America. We don't especially recommend reading it (unless you are entertained by that sort of thing) but look at this passage:

I will examine exactly what the Bush Administration *in fact* stands for, which is in stark contrast to the claims of Bush's mindless chorus of fawning acolytes.

This "stark contrast" between the conspirators' *purported motives* and their *real motives* is at the heart of every political conspiracy theory. For if a conspiracy theory is to explain observed events in current affairs and history, the conspirators' hidden actions must somehow be translated into something significant and visible – a war, a major change in the law, the enrichment of some group and the impoverishment of another – which requires visible actions and efforts by large numbers of people. If, for whatever reason, the real objective of those efforts cannot be acknowledged openly, then many of those people must believe that they are furthering some different objective.

Now, consider a person who favours that ostensible objective and works towards it, but opposes the conspirators' true objective. Such a person is a dupe of the conspirators. Conspiracy theorists always believe in the existence of dupes because they see themselves as desperately warning them to open their eyes and see what would be "blinding ... in its clarity" if they did; but also, the alleged conspiracy itself usually depends on the cooperation of many dupes, such as journalists and political commentators ("Bush's mindless chorus of fawning acolytes") and soldiers and civil servants and of course ordinary voters.

It is in the interests of the conspirators to enlist as many dupes as possible. Every lie the conspirators tell, every secret meeting they hold, every secret decision they take and every secret message they share, incurs a risk of exposure. Therefore, the more dupes are willing to further the aims of the conspiracy without having to participate in the secret planning and without having to conceal their real reasons for supporting the plans, the safer the secret is. Also, the more dupes spontaneously work hard on the conspirators' behalf without wanting a payoff, the fewer real conspirators are needed to achieve the objective. And if there are spoils (there usually are!) the larger the share each conspirator will receive.

So there are lots of dupes. But the question arises: *are there any politicians among them?*

It is in the nature of conspiracy theories that there is no immediate way of telling. Since the conspiracy depends on the conspirators behaving, in public, exactly as if they were dupes, it must be true that any duped politicians would be behaving in public exactly as if they were conspirators: arguing for the policy, voting for it, trying to discredit its opponents, cutting deals to promote it and so on.

You can see where this is going, can't you? *How high are the dupes allowed to rise?* For all we know, even some of the highest-ranking Neo-Cons are dupes. Even some members of the Cabinet might be outside the Conspiracy and genuinely be motivated by the arguments and objectives they advance in public. Could the President himself be a dupe? If he was lying about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction then he was a Conspirator, and of course nothing could ever prove that he wasn't. But there again, there is no evidence that he was lying.

The fact is, *all* supporters of the Administration's policy could be 'dupes' – or rather, honest holders of the opinions they purport to hold – and still behave exactly as we see them behave. In other words, if there were no conspiracy there at all, we'd never know.

Well, obviously.

And therefore, the conspiracy theory explains exactly nothing. Yet it appends layers of weirdness and complexity to the commonsense picture of the world. There is an unlimited supply of such (non-)explanations, all postulating invisible complexity and all contradicting each other. Even if one of them were true, it would be vanishingly unlikely that anyone would happen to hit on it by a method that was impervious to evidence.

That is one reason why, in practice, conspiracy theories are always false.

But there is also another, more important reason.

Conspiracy Theories – 3: Unseen Events

When George Mikes (the humourist and author of *How to be an Alien*) was very young and not yet able to read, he formulated a theory to explain his experiences. It was that *no one can read*: older people were merely pretending to see meaning in random squiggles of ink on paper, and were secretly laughing at his gullibility.

This had all the formal attributes of a conspiracy theory: it alleged that significant events in Mikes' life (adults reading to him, and trying to teach him to read) were part of a secret plan that involved the conspirators' lying to him about facts and about their own motives, in order to benefit at his expense (in this case merely by being amused). It also explained away his own relative *ineffectiveness* (his inability to read, compared with other people's apparent ability to), in terms of his *powerlessness* and their power over him. This is another very common theme of conspiracy theories. His theory differed from a standard conspiracy theory mainly in the way he held it: in particular, in the way he abandoned it.

He did not say how he first came to doubt it, but we can guess what must have been involved: simply *taking it seriously as an explanation of reality*. Perhaps at some point he noticed that different adults were able to read the same story out of a given book. Such observations would not have proved anything, but they would have multiplied the invisible events that must have been happening if the no-one-can-read theory was true: now, instead of merely laughing at him behind his back, the adults must have been learning stories by heart, and coordinating which ones they were going to pretend were contained in which

book. They must have been pretending to find their way to unfamiliar places by reading road signs, feigning frustration when they left the shopping list at home, pretending that mail contained information from distant relatives, and so on. To maintain all those pretences would have involved hidden processes of great complexity, centring on the young Mikes, and laboriously hidden from him.

So what? Nature is full of hidden processes of great complexity; people do often hide things laboriously from other people – not least from children. Mikes was not wrong to be sceptical: initially, he could not have distinguished what he was told about reading from what he was told about Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. What was essential, though, was that he be just as sceptical of his own alternative explanation. And more: he needed to be seeking a true explanation, to care whether reality did or did not conform, even in unseen ways, to whatever explanation he adopted. Though his no-one-can-read explanation could never have been *proved* false, he was not looking for proof. He had not proposed it in order to create an unassailable dogma, but simply because he had a problem imagining a reality in which all those squiggles meant something. But then, given the role that he could see that alleged meaning playing in the lives of the people around him, he would soon have realised that postulating a further slew of apparently meaningless behaviour (the conspiracy) in the reality beyond his immediate perceptions did nothing to solve that problem. In effect it merely raised it again, but all the worse for being projected off the page and out into the wider world.

So, when he thought about the evidence available to him, though he would never have faced disproof, he would have faced a choice: try again to understand the hidden meanings in the squiggles – which might be difficult and, for all he knew, might never work – or attribute everything he saw to the hidden conspiracy. The latter option was guaranteed always to be available. Yet, at some point, he must have realised that the world could not be understood in those terms.

This is the choice which conspiracy theorists make differently and irrationally. They do care about *some* invisible events: the relatively small number that they love to think about, such as President Bush and his inner circle discussing their evil plan to seize the Iraqi oil fields. But they don't care enough to follow through the implications for the host of other invisible events that would also have to be happening if those were – such as how the conspiracy would recruit its members and how it would agree upon a new plan, and what exactly the conspirators' reward is and how it gets to them. We shall say more about this in the next instalment, but in general terms: conspiracy theorists chronically fail to form a serious model of what reality would be like if their theory of it were true. They paint on a large canvas with only a tiny area of detail, always preferring the security of familiar patterns of thought that are guaranteed to provide the semblance of an explanation, to the uncertainty and difficulty of trying to understand what the facts really are.

Conspiracy Theories – 4: Collectivism

Have you heard the one about light bulbs? The secret of everlasting light bulbs has been known for decades but is being suppressed by the manufacturers of electrical goods because they would be ruined if people did not continually have

to buy new bulbs. But how do they enforce this policy among themselves, and how do they prevent researchers (including their own, who are presumably dupes wasting their lives tinkering with an obsolete technology) from rediscovering the principle?

Now give the story a more sinister turn. The myth relies on conspiracy. Even if an individual firm would seize avidly the opportunity created by the everlasting light bulb, the manufacturers would establish a cartel to see that our inventor was assassinated or otherwise removed from the scene.

This urban myth is one of a class of conspiracy theories about evil capitalists. They are widely believed. And yet the people who believe them – and make real-life decisions on the assumption that they are true – nevertheless fail to wonder about even the most elementary implications of their own theory. For instance, how does the conspiracy get transmitted to the next generation? There must come a point at which a conspirator's child, or a talented young executive about to be promoted from Dupe to Conspirator, is taken aside and told the dirty secret: "until now you have believed that we make our living by making a positive contribution to society, but in fact we are secretly parasites and murderers". What happens to those who are appalled by the revelation and want nothing to do with the conspiracy? Can all light bulb manufacturers be relied upon to murder their own children if they suspect they may be about to flirt with environmentalism, or with integrity? What happens to manufacturers who are going bankrupt anyway and so have nothing more to gain from the conspiracy, but could be saved by capitalising on the secret? If the conspiracy theory is true, we cannot directly observe how the conspirators deal with such dramatic problems, but we do know that they must be doing so: the logic of the situation dictates that a long-lasting conspiracy must include some method of converting dupes to conspirators. And this method must be extremely reliable despite the fact that it involves people suddenly and radically altering the moral values on which they base their lives.

But the believers in such theories just don't care. We have remarked that one characteristic of conspiracy theories is that their holders apply them very selectively to explain away some aspects of the world that they do not like. They are uninterested in any wider consequences that their theory would have if it were true. In other words, they fail to take their own theory seriously as an account of what is happening in the world.

It is therefore no accident that conspiracy-theoretic ways of thinking are always associated with collectivist fantasies of one sort or another. For Marxists, the 'ruling class' has many of the attributes of a *person* – a devious, dangerous person capable of having inherent 'interests' and secret motives and taking coherent actions to further them. Likewise, Nazis and other antisemites conceive of The Jews (or often, tellingly, 'The Jew') as being such an entity, while for many Libertarians The State plays this role. If the conspiracy theorists can manage to think entirely in terms of this monstrous Person and its evil agenda, then they never have to think about the issues which make all conspiracy theories ludicrously flawed when taken seriously – issues such as how the conspirators are supposed to communicate, agree upon their evil plans, deal with dissenters, launder the funds needed to pay the assassins, groom a new generation to take over in due course, fool and control the dupes, distribute the

spoils and so on, all while plausibly pretending that all their overt actions have some entirely different purpose.

Some ideologies have become notorious for the conspiracy theories that they contain. So when we find people who earnestly believe the light bulb myth, we may well enquire whether they are (say) socialists, and if so, we may guess that this explains their gullibility in regard to the economics of electrical technology. Given our analysis here, though, it is possible that the true explanation goes in the other direction. It may be that people are attracted to collectivist ideologies (including Libertarian versions of statism) because they want to believe a conspiracy theory and because the collectivist ideology allows them to disregard its flaws, rather than vice versa.

Conspiracy Theories – 5: Paranoia As Faith

The Soviet dictator Josef Stalin was notorious for his all-encompassing paranoia. And yet, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn pointed out in his novel *The First Circle*, even Stalin was not *entirely* lacking in the capacity to trust:

Distrust of people was the dominating characteristic of Joseph Djughashvili [Stalin]; it was his only philosophy of life. He had not trusted his own mother; neither had he trusted God, before whom as a young man he had bowed down in His temple. He had not trusted his fellow Party members, especially those with the gift of eloquence. He had not trusted his comrades in exile. He did not trust the peasants to sow their grain or harvest their wheat unless he forced them to do it and watched over them. He did not trust the workers to work unless he laid down their production targets. He did not trust the intellectuals to help the cause rather than to harm it. He did not trust the soldiers and the generals to fight without penal battalions and field security squads. He had never trusted his relatives, his wives or his mistresses. He had not even trusted his children. And how right he had been!

In all his long, suspicion-ridden life he had only trusted one man. That man had shown the whole world that he knew his own mind, knew whom it was expedient to like and whom to hate; and he had always known when to turn round and offer the hand of friendship to those who had been his enemies.

This man, whom Stalin had trusted, was Adolf Hitler.

And so, when Hitler suddenly invaded the Soviet Union, betraying Stalin's trust and their non-aggression treaty (including all the nasty little secret clauses under which they had plotted jointly to enslave Eastern Europe), Stalin

blindly and fanatically *refused to believe* Hitler was going to attack and even after the Nazi assault began still *refused to believe* that Hitler had ordered the offensive. [Harrison E. Salisbury, emphases in original.]

Stalin also refused to believe his own spies, such as the astonishing Richard Sorge, who had sent specific and timely warnings of Hitler's plans, complete with smoking-gun evidence in the form of photographs of diplomatic telegrams.

Stalin nevertheless preferred to believe Hitler.

Stalin's island of gullibility in his ocean of paranoia is not exceptional – in fact, it is the rule. For instance, conspiracy theorists today prefer to believe that the likes of Saddam and Osama and Arafat tell the truth while Blair and Bush and Sharon lie. For, despite Solzhenitsyn's understandable mockery, what Stalin trusted uncritically was not Hitler, it was his own explanation (or rather, his own conspiracy-theoretic non-explanation) of what makes the world tick. Hitler was a natural beneficiary though, because he shared the same explanation. And it was Stalin's blind faith in this false world view, his inability to modify it in response to new information, that betrayed him. That is why it is not really very surprising that a person for whose “only philosophy of life” was distrust, came to lay himself wide open to the biggest betrayal of all time.

Paranoids, cynics and conspiracy theorists think of themselves as the most sceptical, the least gullible of the human race, and hence also as the most secure against disappointment. “If you're a pessimist,” the saying goes, “at least you'll never be disappointed”. But that could hardly be more false. Just look at the world of disappointment that Hitler let himself in for when he deduced, from the depths of his cynicism, that Britain was all talk and would never fight. Just look how heartbroken all the cynics and pessimists on today's political scene are whenever things go well in Iraq or Afghanistan.

In reality, such people are not the least gullible in the world but the most. For their approach to understanding the complex and frightening world of human affairs is not characterised by the countless possible explanations that they have vowed to reject, but by the single conspiracy-theoretic mode of explanation that they have vowed to believe regardless of all evidence or experience or argument to the contrary. This is not scepticism in the rational sense of the word, it is faith. They have chosen to put blind faith in their conspiracy theories. But the world punishes blind faith. Tyrants in general tend to be paranoid, yet nevertheless, they nearly always end up disappointed as well. Stalin was relatively lucky in his disappointment: most of them die of it.

Conspiracy Theories – 6: Theories That Are Merely False

When Yasser Arafat died, the world's conspiracy theorists predictably went into a frenzy of accusing Israel of having poisoned him.

This was not a conspiracy theory.

Although it fits well into the conspiracy-theoretic world view because it shares some of the attributes of conspiracy theories, it lacks a key attribute by which we recognise conspiracy theories as irrational and as false. As we have said, a conspiracy theory is:

an explanation of observed events in current affairs and history (✓) ... which

alleges that those events were planned and caused in secret by powerful (or allegedly powerful) conspirators (✓), who thereby...

benefit at the expense of others (✓, sort of), and who therefore...

lie, and suppress evidence, about their secret actions (✓), and...

lie about the motives for their public actions (x).

For the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to have had Arafat poisoned, he would not have needed to lie about his motives, only his actions. Sharon and his government had said many times that Arafat was a mass murderer and actively engaged in terrorism, so their publicly announced and defended policy of targeting such people would in principle apply. It was only out of expediency that they had decided not to kill him. This means that the operation, had it existed, would have required no dupes: the active cooperation of only a few senior officers, politicians, undercover agents, and possibly a military scientist or two would have been needed, and *all of them could have been informed of the operation's real nature and its real purpose*. Hence there would have been no need for the impossible task of promoting dupes to conspirators, which is an archetypal flaw of conspiracy theories.

Lest any readers misunderstand our example here, we must stress that it is not even remotely plausible that Sharon had Arafat killed. But that is because of the specific political, military and moral circumstances, and not, as in the case of conspiracy theories, because the idea is irrational in its form.